FALL 25c

TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE

ANC-T075

THE GIRL BETRAYED HIM

WILD WAYMIRE
by Lewis B. Patten

"TORTURE THE WOMAN FIRST!"

THE WHITE APACHE
by Steuart Emery

HE LIVED BY THE GUN

WHEN CROOKED TRAILS CROSS
by Walt Coburn

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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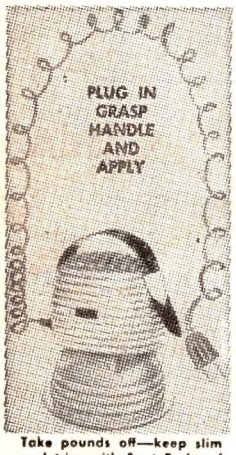

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THREE WESTERN ACTION NOVELS

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 16, NO. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION FALL, 1955

WILD WAYMIRE

Ernie Waymire was the easy-going son of a cattle king till the night his girl helped frame him and hell cut loose with a bang

LEWIS B. PATTEN 8

THE WHITE APACHE

The Apache chief was no Indian, but Captain Finlay well knew he wouldn't hesitate to torture his beautiful brunette captive

STEUART EMERY 54

WHEN CROOKED TRAILS CROSS

No one knew better than Loveless how thin was the line between good and bad, yet the law would call the girl's father guilty

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., Editor

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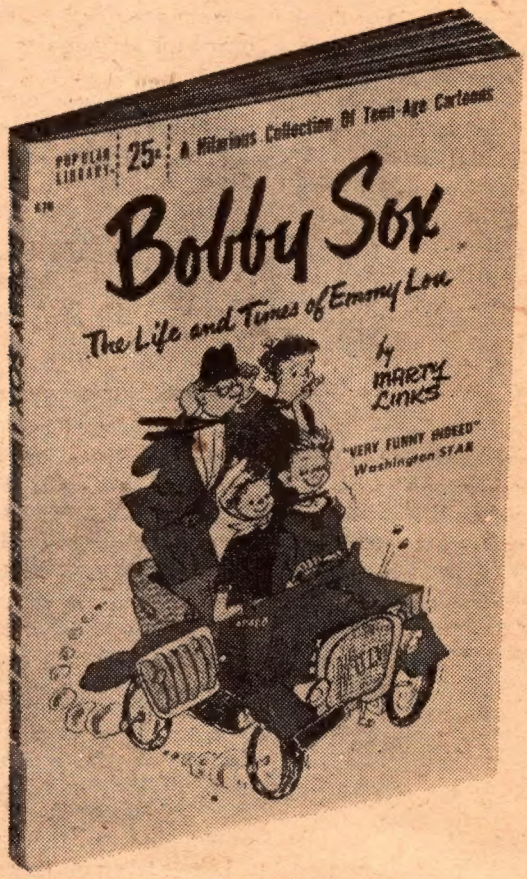

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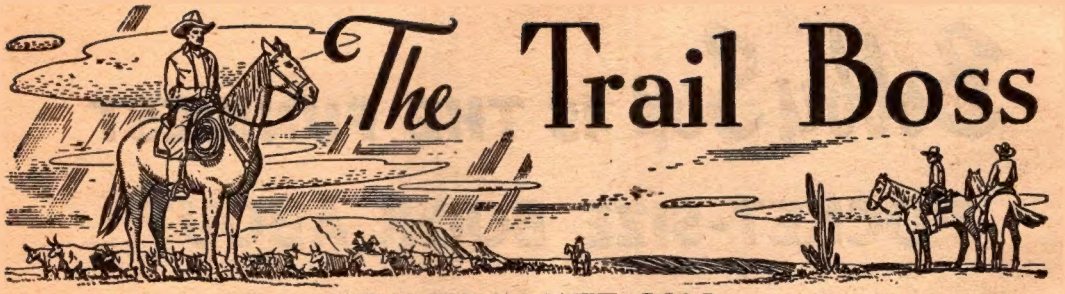

The Trail Boss

WEALTH IN WET GOLD

THE movies notwithstanding, in the turbulent days of the old West not all gold robberies were staged at pistol point. Then, as now, there were slick operators who conceived various ways of separating miners from their hard-earned dust painlessly and with a minimum of personal risk.

Heading the list of these "golden grifters" were barkeeps who had the art of chiseling down to a science. Such a one was a character we shall call Jonah, since his name is not recorded. Thanks to nature, Jonah had the one asset practically guaranteed to make his dust-swiping sideline a success—a big thumb.

As was the custom in the 1850's, miners paid for their food and drink with "pinches" of gold dust. After ordering a drink, the miner would open his leather poke and the barkeep, not the customer, would dip in his thumb and forefinger and take a healthy pinch of the dust. Jonah had been thrice-blessed by nature for not only did he have a king-sized thumb but also a beautiful golden beard and hair to match.

It was Jonah's custom, after collecting for a drink—always with wet hands—and dropping the pinch of dust into whatever passed for cash registers in those days, to draw his thumb and forefinger through his luxuriant beard and long yellow locks. Thus the dust that had stuck to his wet thumb transferred its affection to the hairs of his beard. And since this was blonde the dust was beautifully concealed from customers and watchful saloon owner alike.

By closing time Jonah's jaw threatened to sag from the weight of the gold-laden beard, and he didn't dare nod or shake his head for fear of starting a gold rush!

He would then hotfoot it to his hotel room and proceed to give himself a thorough shampoo. While his erstwhile customers were back in the hills breaking both heart and back to unearth a paltry $12 to $15 worth of gold, the barkeep, with nothing but soap and water, was "panning" his hair and beard for as much as $25 to $40 in ten minutes!

Another practitioner of the "golden grift" was Bart the barkeep at Jim Fair's drink emporium in the town of Shaw's Flat, between Sonora and Angel's Camp. This lad, while he had the necessary broad thumb, was not so fortunate as Jonah in that his beard was as black as a gambler's heart and his head was as bald as a peeled egg. However, he, too, managed to make a good thing out of tending bar. He was careless.

Every time he claimed a pinch of gold for a drink he invariably spilled a bit from each pinch. It was never enough to cause a howl of protest from the customer.

Every time this happened the barkeep would brush the dust off onto the floor in back of the bar. Evidently he liked to keep his bar spic and span. But the same could not be said of the floor behind it. That was thoroughly tracked up with muddy boot prints.

The Jim Fair's barkeep seemed uncommonly partial to muddy boots. Even on the hottest, driest days he wore muddy boots. There was a little spring only a few yards back of the saloon and whenever Bart noticed his boots showed signs of drying he would hurry out and coat the footgear with a heavy layer of sticky black mud.

Those boots were Bart's "gimmick." Every night after closing he would hurry home and give them a thorough cleaning. It was said, by those few in the know, that after an extra busy day the barkeep would walk home in his bare feet carrying the precious boots. After "panning" each boot his nightly yield was almost never under $20.

—*Murray T. Pringle*

BULLET FOR A COWARD

by Seth Kantor

The roar of a colt .45 pierced the shouting. There was a cry of agony, then another shot. Bart fell to his knees whimpering. He wasn't hit. He was scared stiff!

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43P

Wild Waymire

A Novel by LEWIS B. PATTEN

Ernie Waymire was the easy-going son of a cattle king till the night his girl helped frame him for a killing and all hell boiled over . . .

I

BLEAK and empty the land stretched, mile after mile of it. At times, it was almost level, until it brought up sharply against the foot of some rocky escarpment. From there, perhaps, it would become a badlands of strange, eroded rock formations that reached away for miles before leveling again.

Grass grew sparsely, in scattered bunches and clumps. Sometimes a single plant would put up but a single blade. Yet this was the sustenance for thousands of cattle. Waymire cattle—Wheel cattle.

After years of breeding here, the cattle had grown used to the blistering heat of summer, to the cold, raw wind of winter. They had learned that the snow scoured first from the ridge tops, so it was on the ridge tops that they fed when the snow was deep. They had learned where the water was in the dryness of late summer, and would walk miles at day's end to suck from some tepid, moss-grown pool.

Harsh was the land, yet in its own way, beautiful. Harsh was old Matthew Waymire, and his harshness had in no way been tempered by the beauty of the land. He could see none of it.

He gave no notice to the flame of setting sun against a red sandstone cliff, nor to the lace tracery of moonlight sifting through the naked branches of a cottonwood. A clear stream winding limpidly through the new-green growth of willows that bordered it was just a place to water a thirsty horse.

The dusty-hot cauldron of desert was a thing to be endured, the cool fragrance of shade at evening a thing to be sought for relief, but not enjoyed. The wild profusion of desert flowers in spring were only irritations to Matthew, because some of them could poison his stock.

A sour man was Matthew Waymire, a bitter man. A man who lived with some cancer of guilt within in his mind. He read often from his huge, brass-bound Bible, yet unto himself he applied none of its gentler passages; only those which were harsh and unbending.

To Matthew Waymire, hating beauty, a woman's body was a sinful thing because it stirred his primal hungers and made them harder to control. Liquor was equally sinful, for it loosened the iron grip a man must always keep upon himself.

Guilt had damned Matthew to a lifetime of remorse. But the years had given him two hatreds to compensate for the misery of remorse. He hated Olaf Hunnicutt and he hated women.

ERNIE WAYMIRE, his oldest son, had been known to remark in moments of bitter rebellion, "I can understand how he might have strayed long enough to sire me. But Al puzzles me. Al's a year younger. Al proves that he must have done it twice."

Work and austerity were the order of the day at the Wheel. But the country said from the time the two boys began to mature, "He'll hold them down until something breaks. Five will get you ten that it ain't old Matt that breaks, either."

In the first, cool dusk of a summer night, Ernie Waymire stepped casually out of the house at the Wheel. He loitered for a few moments, making sure that old Matthew would not follow him out. He squatted against one of the peeled poles that supported the portico and shaped a cigarette. Touching fire to its end, he stared out across the bare and windswept yard.

The Wheel was a strict working outfit. There was no grass here, save for that which grew of itself; no flowers or shrubbery. The ranch house, bunkhouse and barn were all built low, of adobe bricks, and each had its long, pole-supported portico on one side. Cottonwoods, ancient and tall, sheltered the yard from the glare of sun at mid-day.

Hot, animal odors of barn and corral were heavy in the air, mingling with the pungent, spicy smell of sagebrush broken off by the horse herd as it was turned out at nightfall.

Suddenly, nervously, purposefully, Ernie got to his feet and with swift strides put the yard between himself and the house.

He was tall, but there was no lankiness about him. His shoulders were wide and solid, and muscles rippled beneath his thin blue shirt as he tossed saddle up on the back of the gleaming sorrel he would ride tonight. Ernie's belly was flat, his thighs lean and long. His hands were large and broad. He wore a pair of gray woolen pants tucked into the tops of knee-high boots. Spurs made a pleasant jangle as he swung up into saddle.

Beneath his cowman's high-crowned hat, his face was somber and still as he stared back at the house. High cheek-bones, faintly hollowed cheeks, and bright dark eyes gave him a look of fierceness, almost like that of an Indian.

It was plain that his thoughts were troubled. What he would do tonight, what he had done so many nights before, amounted to open rebellion. And he was too used to knuckling under before old Matthew's whims and prejudices for it not to bother him.

From the open door of the bunkhouse came the low, throbbing strains of some Spanish air, played on a guitar. The liquid, soft voice of Ramon Ortiz sang the words meaningfully.

Suddenly Ernie grinned. A Spanish love song. Old Matthew would be loving this. He'd be sitting in the house, fuming, scowling, itching to go to the door and roar his order to Ortiz to shut up. But he wouldn't do it. He'd lost a couple of crews trying to ram his Spanish bit into their mouths. Good sense would keep him from trying it again.

Oddly stirred by the music, Ernie reined around and put his horse away from the corral and down the cutbank into the dry bed of Gila Creek. Climbing out on the other side, he touched his spurs lightly to the sorrel's sides.

Unlike old Matthew, Ernie was sensitive to the beauty of this open and empty land. Moonlight, blue-white, bathed the broad reaches of desert, washed the rocky escarpments in the distance with its glow. He began to think of Irene Hunnicutt, and the blood in his veins throbbed hot and fast. He let the horse run, enjoying this, the moonlight upon the land, the memory of music, the horse's power beneath him, and the anticipation of Irene's warm lips, her soft, white arms.

THE Hunnicutts, father, two sons and Irene, had a small ranch in a deep canyon some fifteen miles from the Wheel. There was bad blood between them and old Matthew, bad blood that had existed even before Matt and Olaf Hunnicutt had come to this hot country to settle. Neither Ernie nor his brother Al knew what the enmity was about. But they knew how real it was.

Olaf Hunnicutt was a huge, lusty, red-faced bull of a man. If Ernie had hunted through all of New Mexico for Matthew's exact opposite, he could have done no better than Olaf Hunnicutt. They were opposite in looks, in temperament, in outlook. Matthew was rich, Olaf poor; Matthew lived like a monk, Olaf for the satiation of his body hungers.

Ernie frowned, and slowed the sorrel to a pace that he could maintain over the entire distance. At ten, he sighted the canyon ahead of him, but instead of dropping into it by the road, he kept right, rising, and at last could look down upon the Hunnicutt ranch from the high, cedared rim.

Tension came to him now. Moonlight, sifting through the jungle of ancient cedars, dappled the ground. Ernie threaded his way silently and carefully along the rim. Excitement kept rising in him, mingling with the tension in a way he foud oddly pleasant.

He seldom considered nowadays what would happen to him if one of the Hunnicutt men found Irene in his arms. Nor did he think of the violence that would shake old Matthew if he knew. He was in the grip of something stronger than himself, stronger than any parental discipline.

He dismounted at the usual place, tied his horse, and advanced quietly afoot. His hands began to tremble slightly. Then he heard her voice, eager, soft, inviting:

"Ernie?"

She came out of the moon-dappled darkness, straight into his arms. Her lips were scalding against his, her body firmly molded to him. There was a certain wild abandon about her that Ernie loved. The urge that gripped him when he held her was as elemental as birth and death, a thing that could not be denied.

Laughing shakily, she broke away, taking his hand. She was tall; only a head shorter than Ernie himself. Tall and strong-bodied, yet having a willowy grace that was all her own. She led him to where her horse was tied, to where a blanket was spread on the ground. She sat down, pulling him with her. Trembling, she pulled his face against her breasts. Soft they were, rising and falling with her agitated breathing.

Ernie raised his head. Moonlight fell upon the thin fabric of her dress, by shadow and highlight revealing each luscious curve of her body. He touched his lips to hers. She flung herself tight against him. Her breath came raggedly.

Ernie pushed her away. His voice was hoarse. He said, "To hell with the Wheel. To hell with everything! I can't stand much more of this. I want you to marry me."

With unsteady hands he shaped a cigarette. She watched his face in the glow of the match, her eyes large and unreadable. When she spoke it was as though something were forcing the words from her.

"No, Ernie. Not unless you will take me home with you to the Wheel."

"I can't do that! Damn it, you know why I can't!"

"Because you're afraid?"

Ernie could feel a kind of cold fury stirring in his heart. He told himself that Irene did not really love him. He told himself that she was calculating and cold, that all she wanted was a place for herself at the Wheel. Suddenly he wanted to strike her, to hurt her. But he knew he would not.

HE FORCED his voice to be patient. "I can't take you to the Wheel, and you

know why. I've lived with Matthew all my life. There are just two things he hates—women and Hunnicutts. And you're both. You think you know Matthew, but you don't. If I took you there and told him you were my wife, he'd use names on you that I wouldn't use on a bitch dog. Then he'd run us both off. Is that what you want?"

She shook her head. "No. But I don't believe he's that hard. Once the thing was done, I think he'd accept it."

Ernie laughed harshly. "He never accepted anything in his life but his own way. I'll marry you tonight, tomorrow, any day you say. But we'll have to go away."

He wished he could see her face, wished he could see the play of expression upon it. But a shadow lay over it, hiding its expression.

She was silent, and Ernie's anger grew. He stood up, asking, "Are you going to marry me, or the Wheel? Do you want a husband or a ranch?"

"Maybe I don't want either one." There was a definite asperity in her voice. "I don't care if you marry me or not!" Her tone had risen sharply, but suddenly it softened. "Ernie, Ernie, don't quarrel with me!"

"I'm not quarreling." This was not the first time he had asked her to marry him, nor was it the first time she had refused because he wouldn't take her home to the Wheel.

He made an impatient gesture with his big, broad hands, then stopped and raised her to her feet. He didn't particularly want to kiss her. But he did. He found her lips cold and unresponsive.

Anger stirred in him again. He said, "Are you afraid I couldn't provide for you?" Unreasoning was the desire to hurt her. "Or do you just want to get your hooks into the cashbox at the Wheel?"

Even in the moon glow he could see her face go pale. He expected her to slap him for that. He saw two tears spill out of her eyes and run across her cheeks.

He said, "Oh, hell! You know I didn't mean that."

"No." Her voice was a whisper. "I know you didn't."

"What is it then? What's the matter with you?"

She was crying openly now. Sobs shook her shoulders. She was silent for so long that he thought she was not going to answer. He longed to take her in his arms. He longed to agree to her demand. But he knew he couldn't. He knew how violent and vicious old Matthew could be, and Irene did not.

Finally she said, her voice so quiet it sounded forced. "I want to be proud of you, and I want you to be proud of me. I don't want to marry you and then slip away somewhere as though we both had guilty consciences."

Ernie waited for her to look up, but she did not. He had a quick and sure knowledge that she was lying, but he could not have said how he knew. It was a feeling which came to him perhaps because they were so close.

There was a long, strained silence. Once she moved, as though to come closer to him, but instead she stepped away. Her rigid control of herself puzzled him.

Ernie shrugged. He said, "I'm sorry. It's just no good tonight, is it?"

She shook her head. "When will I see you again?"

Ernie said, "I don't know," but she would not let it go at that. With a kind of desperate urgency, she asked, "Saturday?"

"All right."

An unaccustomed obstinacy prevented him from taking her in his arms. He stared at her, seeing the pale, beautiful oval of her face, the silky sheen of her jet hair. Her gray eyes were pools of shadow. She turned away from him abruptly, picked up the blanket and folded it. She tied it on behind her saddle, then untied the reins and swung up easily into her side saddle. Without a word or a backward glance she rode away.

ERNIE stood for a moment looking after her. Somewhere behind him, the dry limb of a cedar cracked.

He jumped, as though it had been a gunshot. He whirled, thinking even as he did, "A deer." He shrugged, and began to shape another cigarette. He told himself, still thinking of that unexpected noise, "If anyone had seen us, they'd waste no time letting us know about it."

But the self-assurance failed to quiet his chill feeling of unease. When he walked to

She swung up into her side saddle and rode away without a word

where he had tied his horse, the location of that sharp sound lingered in his mind. As suddenly as he had heard the first noise, he heard a second—a crashing of brush, farther away, in the direction of the Wheel.

He swung quickly to saddle, but realized at once that it was useless to try and give chase. The cedars stretched away for a couple of miles before they gave way to open desert.

So he turned and pointed his horse roughly in the direction from which the first sound had come. He kept his eyes fixed on the soft ground. After five minutes of circling, he picked up a track. Not a deer track. A man track with high heel and spur making their deep indentation.

Ernie Waymire felt a chill run down his spine. His stomach felt empty. His hands shook as he dismounted. He struck a match and stared down at the fresh track.

When he got to his feet, a sense of impending doom was heavy in his thoughts. Leading his horse, he followed the boot tracks, finding a little farther on the branch that had been broken off.

He followed afoot until he came to the place where the man had mounted. Here, Ernie mounted too, and set out following the tracks. It was slow going. Moonlight was bright, but not bright enough for trailing, and at last Ernie gave it up.

But he had established one thing. Whoever had watched them tonight had not headed for Hunnicutt's. He had headed for the Wheel.

II

IRENE HUNNICUTT rode slowly until she was out of earshot of Ernie. Then she rammed viciously with her spurs into her horse's side. Alternately, her face flamed and paled. Alternately, her body turned hot and cold.

Anger raged in her, and frustration, and shame. She knew a wild despair, for she knew that now Olaf would wait no longer.

She came into the yard just before midnight. A single lamp burned in the house. She supposed her brothers were both in bed. But Olaf was not. He was waiting up.

Fear touched her as she walked toward the house, but she made her face defiant as she went inside. Olaf looked up from his chair and saw the defiance immediately. She could not tell whether he saw the fear or not. He had been drinking.

He was a big man, a huge hulk of a man. Fat had begun to overlay his considerable muscular structure. Yet even without the fat he would have weighed well over two hundred pounds. His face was ruddy, his eyes blue beneath the folds of fat around them. His mouth was generous, but now it drew into a thin line.

He said, "So you flubbed it. You can't make a go of it."

"I can. He'd marry me in a minute, but he won't take me home to the Wheel."

Olaf Hunnicutt laughed, but there was no humor in the laugh. Only a sort of unfeeling savagery.

"That's what he thinks! All right. You've had your chance to marry the Wheel. You couldn't make it. Now you'll marry Ernie. And I'll see that he takes you home to the Wheel if I have to go along myself."

Before, Irene's fear had been intangible, a vague feeling that would not go away. Now, suddenly, it became very real. It was as though she could see the violence that would come from Olaf's threatened action.

She cried, "No! Give me a little more time. He'll come around!"

She wondered whether Ernie ever would. She didn't really care, now. This had started as a grab for Wheel, for revenge against Matthew Waymire. But it had changed when she had fallen in love with Ernie Waymire. Then it had been too late to stop.

Too, there had been her awful fear of Olaf when he was balked and defeated. There had been too many times when she had felt the fury that frustration could stir in him. He was a little mad, she knew. He was perhaps not responsible when temper took the reins. But that would not help her if she got in his way.

He said harshly, "Time, hell! You've had all the time you're going to get." He got up, stood over her like a gigantic bear. His face was covered with soft, blond whiskers.

Suddenly Irene's shoulders sagged. She didn't want it this way. But she knew her father well enough to know that there was

no way out now. Hatred for Matthew Waymire was an obsession with him. He had built this scheme only to hurt Matthew, well knowing Matthew's hatred both for Hunnicutts and women in general.

Olaf asked, "When you going to meet him again?"

Irene felt a moment's rebillion as she visualized what would happen Saturday night. She said, "What would you do if I ran away with him? What would you do if I refused to go through with it the way you want it?"

Olaf's eyes glittered. His huge hands closed on her shoulders, and the fingers bit in cruelly, bruising, crushing. She gasped with pain.

His eyes inches from hers, blazing bits of icy rage, he said, "Why, I'd hunt you down. I'd tell him what part you had in this. I'd tell him how we planned it all, just to get our hooks on the Wheel. I'd tell him how you repeated to me everything he said to you, and I'd tell him how you laughed as you told it."

IRENE cried, "But I didn't! I didn't do do that. The things he said to me are private." Suddenly her shoulders sagged. She knew she was lost. She had made too much a point of wanting Ernie to take her home to the Wheel. He would remember that.

Olaf said, "He'll believe me, not you."

There was a certain apparent rugged honesty in Olaf when he wanted it to be. And Irene knew he'd bring it off.

He asked her again, "When are you meeting him?"

Irene said wearily, "Saturday night." She was in this now, and there was no getting out. But perhaps, if she tried, she could minimize the violence. Perhaps she could win Matthew over. At least she could try. She would try hard.

Olaf grinned. He said, "By God, I'm going to enjoy this." He struck a pose, scowling in fatherly outrage. "How's this?"

Irene said, "Oh, stop it! You won't have to act." She turned away toward the door of her room.

Behind her, her father chuckled obscenely. He asked, "How is Ernie anyway?"

Irene's face flamed. She knew what her father meant. But she said, "He's quite well," and slammed the door. Olaf roared with laughter.

Irene felt cheap and soiled. She slipped out of her clothes into her long flannel nightgown, and lay down on the bed.

What would Ernie think of her? He wasn't a fool. Sooner or later he would put together her refusal to marry him unless he took her to the Wheel, and her father's sudden appearance at the place where they met. When Olaf tried to force him to take her to the Wheel, he would know that the whole thing was a put-up job.

Irene admitted that she was in this fix because of her own immature stupidity and greed. At first she had been willing to go along with Olaf's plan, for she knew if they succeeded she would become mistress of the Wheel. All her friends had married settlers or small cowmen, but she had dreamed of something better for herself than a one-room, dirt-floored cabin. Her face flamed again. Olaf thought her romance with Ernie had developed further than it actually had.

What was wrong with a man who would urge his own daughter to trap a man into a marriage that meant nothing to him but revenge? She knew the answer to that immediately. The cancer of hatred in her father's brain was more important to him than his own flesh and blood, more important even than life itself. Revenge against Matthew Waymire was all that mattered to him.

But revenge for what? That was something Irene had never been able to find out. What she did know was that until she had become old enough, Olaf had been helpless to take action. He had lived here on the fringe of the Wheel, running his cattle, letting his hatred fester and spread.

But as Irene had begun to fill out, turn into a woman, an idea had been born in Olaf's mind. Perhaps it had been born that day over a year ago when he had caught Ernie Waymire staring at her on the street in Cedrino. Perhaps he'd seen in Ernie Waymire's interest a crack in old Matthew Waymire's armor.

Irene could remember his first, red-faced anger that Ernie dared to look at her that way. Then a week's quiet thoughtfulness had followed the anger. At last had come

laughter, and the plan.

She recalled his coarse words, "Old Matt'd step right over a woman. But his sons won't. By God, his sons won't."

And Ernie hadn't. Irene felt hot as she remembered how easily she'd fanned his interest. It had been a game, and a chance at wealth and security. Then she had begun really to care for Ernie, and it hadn't been a game any more.

SHE began to cry—hot, bitter tears of self-reproach. Why couldn't she have seen then how wrong it was to trifle with love and marriage for material gain? Why couldn't she have seen before it was too late?

Now she was realizing that a man might grow to hate a woman he was forced to marry. And she was wishing she had accepted Ernie, had fled with him before Olaf got ready to force the issue.

She hid her face in the pillow so that Olaf would not hear her sobs. She even considered getting up now, going to Ernie.

But she discarded that almost at once. Olaf's anger, once aroused, was terrible and merciless. He could and would carry out the threat he had made. Irene shivered, frankly afraid. . . .

At the Wheel, Matthew Waymire and his sons ate in the ranch house. Matthew did not follow this procedure out of consideration for the crew, but because he found their conversation distasteful. Sometimes their talk would concern itself with work, with the problems of the ranch. More often it would deal with the flesh-pots of Cedrino, with the bizarre exploits of the men at Sadie McCarran's parlor house, with their wildly exaggerated luck at the poker tables in the back room of the Horsehead Saloon.

As Ernie came into the kitchen, the rising sun put its red glow on the sprawling 'dobe buildings of the Wheel headquarters. Like blood, it flowed in through the windows, lighting the walls inside. Ernie fixed his eyes on Matthew as his father said harshly, "Where were you last night?" and gave him a cold, unblinking stare.

Ernie had a brief moment of uncertainty, but quickly decided that if Matthew knew, he would hardly be this calm. When the uncertainty passed, resentment came.

He said, sitting down, looking straight at Matthew, "Listen. I do my work around here. I'm not a kid any more. I'm twenty-five. What I do after I'm through working is my own damn business."

It was the first time he had gone this far in asserting his independence. Always before he'd either made up some convenient lie, or had avoided a direct answer. But this morning, for some reason, he knew he was through with lying, through with evasion. He was a grown man. It was time he stood on his own two feet and lived the way he saw fit to live.

Perhaps the sleeplessness and worry of the previous night had something to do with his sudden rebellion. Perhaps the spark of rebellion was born of frustration because he kept failing with Irene.

Matthew's stern and narrow face turned red. He put his fists on the table before him. The cook paused behind him with a coffee pot, waiting to see what he would do.

Matthew was not as large a man as Ernie. But his body was hard, and strong as rawhide. A quick pulse beat in the distended veins of his forehead. His face turned darker, until it was almost purple instead of red.

But his voice was quiet enough. Maybe it was too quiet. He said, "Oh. It's your business is it? You've got to where you can carouse around all night, and it's nobody's business but your own?"

"I wasn't carousing." Ernie regretted instantly the defensive position in which the denial placed him.

"Then what were you doing?" Matthew's voice rose imperceptibly. There seemed to be a new tightness to it, a new wildness. His eyes, gray-green and cold as ice, were narrowed dangerously. His lips were tight and uncompromising. The pulse in his forehead beat faster. He began to breathe hard. He said, "Out rolling on the ground with some floozie, I suppose?"

QUICK anger beat through Ernie. He heard his brother Al clumping toward the kitchen. Al came in sleepily and groped his way to the back door. After a moment, Ernie could hear the squeak of the pump

handle, the splash of water on the plank well cover.

He checked his voice until some of the anger was gone. Then he said, "When the time comes that my nights interfere with my days, then I'll agree that you have a voice in what I do." He stared across at old Matthew, meeting the old man's eyes unflinchinly. It wasn't easy.

Matthew yelled, half rising, "By God!"

But Ernie cut him short. All the years of being held down suddenly piled up, a mountain of suppressed resentment. He said, trying to be calm, "I'm not like you. I like a drink of liquor once in awhile. I like to dance, and I like to play poker. I like women, and there's nothing wrong with that."

Al came in through the door, mopping at his face with a towel. He began to grin delightedly, but Ernie didn't see him.

Matthew came to his feet, shaking with rage. He shouted, "Damn you, if I can't train your mother out of you, I'll beat her out of you!"

Ernie said, not caring now what he said, "What did she do to you? Did she quit you for some other man? If she did, I'll be damned if I blame her—not if you treated her the way you treat Al and me."

He hadn't known the old man could move so fast. Disregarding dishes, food, everything, Matthew came over the table. Ernie staggered back, hardly having time to get his feet under him, then Matthew's fist exploded against his jaw. Ernie tried to raise his guard. Matthew brought a left from somewhere close to the ground. It smashed Ernie's mouth against his teeth. He felt the warm, salt taste of blood.

His right started its arc toward old Matthew's pointed, lantern jaw. But it never arrived. Ernie dropped his hands as suddenly as he had raised them. He couldn't hit his own father, not even in self-defense.

Matthew's right came in again. It seemed to make a pulp of Ernie's nose. He ducked his head and wiped away the blood on his shoulder, still not raising his hands. Matthew gave him a stiff left into his right eye. Ernie staggered back, recovering with difficulty.

A haze of rage seemed to grow in front of his vision. His voice came out, choked with fury, "That's enough!"

"Enough? Enough?" Matthew laughed crazily. "I haven't started! I haven't even started!"

He smashed three successive, driving blows into Ernie's unprotected face. Ernie fought the murderous anger that swam before his eyes. He tried to recover, to put up some kind of resistance, but it was too late. Matthew brought a right up from close to his belly in a vicious uppercut.

It cracked with the sound of a whip on Ernie's jaw. Matthew laughed crazily, his cold eyes showing some strange, perverted pleasure. Ernie's eyes glazed. He staggered. He put his back against the wall and held it there, gasping, trying to remain on his feet.

Al yelled, "Hey—wait!" and began to move.

But Matthew's fists came in, right and left. The right smashed Ernie's mouth again. The left caught the sharp angle of his jaw.

For one brief instant, bright, whirling lights danced before his eyes. He could feel the wall at his back, sliding, slipping away. He felt the floor against his rump, then the room went black.

It might have been a minute. It might have been ten. He heard a groan, and the light began to come back. He realized that the groan had come from his own battered and swollen mouth. One of his eyes was puffed up.

HE LOOKED around the room with the other, the good one. Al sat in a chair at the table, eating. The cook was eying Ernie uncertainly. Matthew was gone.

Ernie struggled to his feet, stood there swaying while the room reeled dizzily before his eyes. When it began to steady, he stepped to the table and slumped into a chair.

Al grinned at him cheerfully. He said, "You talk too damned much."

All the anger was burned out of Ernie. There was something maliciously friendly about Al. Ernie had to grin back at him, but the grin didn't last long. It hurt his battered mouth too much.

He said, looking up at the cook, "How about some of that coffee now?"

Al was laughing softly. He said, "You're a fool. You could have whipped the socks

off him."

The cook, Germanic and stolid, poured out the coffee. He was as dour as old Matthew himself. His face never altered. Ernie raised the steaming cup to his lips, winced at the pain. But he took a deep gulp and immediately felt better.

He said with some wonder, "He enjoyed that, Al. He really got a kick out of whipping me."

All the humor went out of Al. Like a candle snuffed out. A strange look came into his eyes, a look of intense hatred. "I know he did. I was watching him." Then the hatred was gone and again Al was easily smiling. He said, "You ought to know by now that you can't defy him. And you can't bait him."

The rage came back to Ernie, lurid and terrifying. He said with complete conviction, "He'll never do that again. Because next time I won't stand and take it. I'll kill him."

"Then you'd better get the hell away from the Wheel."

Ernie took a long draught of steaming coffee. He began to consider what his life could be away from the Wheel and the sour ill-humor of old Matthew, away from his nagging dissatisfaction with everything Ernie did; away from his sanctimonious rantings.

And once he had broken with Matthew, once he was gone from the Wheel, he knew Irene would come around. She'd marry him.

He stood up. Going to the window, he saw old Matthew riding out of the yard at the head of half a dozen punchers. He said, "Al, I believe I will. I believe I will leave."

He waited until his father was out of sight. Then he stepped into the yard. Al came out and worked the handle of the pump while Ernie bathed his bruised and swollen face in the icy, stinging water. After that, Ernie dried off and went into the house after a clean shirt. With it on, he jammed his hat down over his head and went out to the corral.

Someone had watched him and Irene Hunnicutt last night. In view of his decision to leave the Wheel, it didn't matter so much who it had been. But Ernie was curious. He had until dusk to get his things together and pull out, for he knew Matthew would be gone all day.

He'd ride over to the bluff overlooking Hunnicutt's, and pick up that track, see where it led. Maybe he'd find out who had made it. Of course it could have been one of the hands at the Wheel. But if it had been, Matthew would have the whole story before night.

Ernie grinned uneasily. Matthew had gone loco this morning. But that was nothing compared to what he'd do if he knew about Irene. Ernie knew he would have to leave before his father found out. If he didn't, he'd have Matthew's blood on his hands!

III

AS ERNIE rode, the sun rose on the eastern horizon, immediately hot, but growing hotter as the moments passed. It seemed to wither the grass. It beat down against Ernie's shoulders and battered face.

The numbness had left the bruises, and the swelling had run its course. But still he was scarcely recognizable as Ernie Waymire. One of his eyes was swelled almost shut. A big blue bruise was a blotch on one cheekbone. His nose was bulbous and intensely sore. His lips were cracked and puffy.

He cursed bitterly, and a wry grin spread out over his face, causing him to wince.

He told himself, You ought to known better.

But there came an end to knuckling under. A boy knuckled under because he was small, because his will and resistance were unformed. But as boy turned into man, revolt became inevitable.

It might have been different if Matthew had ever showed either of his sons any affection. But he hadn't. Ernie doubted if there was even a capacity in his father for love. He was amazed, as he had often been before, that he, and Al as well, hadn't turned out more like old Matthew.

He thought, Well, that's one thing to be thankful for.

Ahead of him the desert fell away, mile after mile of shimmering heat. Mirages appeared and disappeared as he approached them. He passed a long line of stringy cattle,

making their way toward the shade of a rocky badlands, returning from water. The tongues of a couple of the calves were hanging out, and a light froth lay over their mouths.

So far, the summer had been drier than most. Already half the water holes on Wheel range had dried up. The remainder had dwindled until it was difficult for more than a dozen cattle to water at them at once. Ernie wished it would rain.

It was about eight when he commenced to climb toward the bluff that overlooked Hunnicutt's. In the daylight, this was a different place than it was at night. The ground was almost barren of grass or other vegetation. There were only the cedars, and the long, green-and-yellow lizards. There was the occasional sign of a coyote, the occasional track of a deer. Off to Ernie's right stretched a huge flat of gray-green sagebrush.

He found the trail he had been following long before he came to the place where he customarily met Irene. Turning, he took this trail. A vast impatience seemed to take hold of him, and his mind shuffled through the hands at the Wheel, trying to decide which of them might have been crafty and sly enough to follow him.

He considered again the possibility that whoever it was had ridden out with Matthew this morning and would tell him what he had seen before the day was gone.

This firmed his decision to leave the Wheel today. As soon as he'd verified his suspicion that the trail led to the Wheel, he'd pack and get out.

He laughed. Pack what? He had an old six-shooter, a converted percussion Navy Colt. He had a beat-up Winchester rifle and a few clothes, work clothes. Nothing else. Nothing else at all.

He looked at himself with some surprise. He looked at his scuffed boots. He looked at his hands, brown and strong, roughened with work and weather. Hell, he was a fool. Since he'd been fourteen, he'd been doing a man's work. Not for wages. For bread and beans. He hadn't over ten dollars he could call his own.

He'd worked like any puncher on Wheel, harder than most, for in him the sense of responsibility, of belonging, was intensified. But for every dollar he'd had to go to Matthew. He'd had to ask for it. And because Matthew gave out a lecture with every dollar, Ernie had got so he didn't ask often.

HE WAS following the trail with only part of his mind. With the other part he was marveling at himself—at Al. Why had they stayed? Ernie grinned. They had stayed because until recently it had never occurred to either of them to leave.

The trail deviated from the straight line between Hunnicutt's and the Wheel. It veered off to the left half a dozen miles before it straightened, and again took the direct route toward the Wheel.

Ernie thought, He was afraid I might overtake him. So he turned away from the trail.

He understood now that this spy, whoever he had been, had followed him away from the Wheel last night. Deliberately.

At noon Ernie followed the trail right into the yard at the Wheel. Al was gone. Ernie went to his room and shoved his few clothes into a blanket and tied them up. He strapped on the Colt and belt and, carrying the Winchester and blanket-wrapped clothes, went down to his horse.

The sorrel was one other thing he owned. He tied his bundle on behind his saddle and swung up. He took a look around the yard. Suddenly an overwhelming sadness possessed him. The Wheel was a big outfit and by leaving he was relinquishing his rights to it. But that was not what bothered him. The Wheel was the only home he had ever known. Here were all the memories he had.

His face somber, he reined around and took the road toward Cedrino. He wondered what he would do, where he would go. If he had any kind of an outfit, he could run wild horses over on the Colorado line. But he had no outfit.

He shrugged. He was a top cowhand. There were plenty of jobs. And he would have Irene. . . .

Al Waymire rode into the yard at the Wheel not ten minutes after Ernie had left. He could still see his brother, a speck on the horizon in the direction of Cedrino. Al thought of Irene Hunnicutt. His grin faded

and his eyes began to glitter. He had to give his brother credit. He hadn't thought Ernie had it in him.

All morning, Al had trailed Ernie, watching him from a distance. And now, squatting in the shade of the corral, the feeling that there was opportunity for himself in this began to grow in him.

Al was different from Ernie in one respect. He admitted his own overpowering hatred for his father. He admitted it, but he didn't know what he could do about it.

He began to think of the color of old Matthew's face this morning as he had fought with Ernie. He recalled that pulse that had beat so wildly in the distended veins of Matthew's forehead. He remembered something else, too, something Ernie hadn't seen because he had been unconscious. Matthew had tottered and almost fallen as he had turned away from Ernie to the door.

Al thought, Saturday. He's meeting her again Saturday.

In some respects, Al was like old Matthew. He was as hard as nails, a fact he kept well hidden beneath his easy-going, laughing exterior.

The triangle in front of the cookhouse banged, and Al got to his feet. Waves of heat shimmered up from the sun-baked ground. He took a place at the long table with those of the crew who had not ridden with Matthew this morning.

Ernie's planned meeting with Irene Hunnicutt kept bothering him; and he ate his dinner absently. Afterward, he hunkered down against the outside wall on the portico, and shaped a cigarette.

Suddenly something which had evaded him all morning became clear in his thoughts. Matthew had a bad heart or something. Too much excitement could cause him to have a stroke or kill him outright.

Al considered this for awhile. The plan that formed almost of its own accord in his mind caused the color to recede from his face so sharply that Ramon Ortiz grinned at him and said, "Heat getting you, Al?"

AL SHOOK his head and forced himself to grin. But he was thinking, What if I told Matthew about Ernie and Irene? What if I took Matthew up on that rim Saturday night?

It didn't take too much insight to know what would happen. Matthew would blow up like a charge of dynamite. Ernie, having already taken one vicious beating at Matthew's hands, would be in no mood to take another, especially in front of Irene Hunnicutt.

Al began to smile. He thought of the long years behind him, thought of all the abuse he had taken from Matthew. He thought of Matthew's penury, feeling the same resentment Ernie had felt because he worked here at the Wheel for nothing but bread and beans, and of Matthew's lectures every time he wanted a few dollars to go to town.

He considered what it might be like if he were master of the Wheel's huge domain.

There was only one thing about his plan that he didn't like. There was no way on earth of controlling it. It was like dynamite in the hands of a child. No one knew which way the force of the blast would turn. No one could accurately gauge the damage which would be done.

Al wanted to hurt Matthew. And he wanted the Wheel. Beyond that he didn't care. He was willing to share the Wheel with Ernie, having always got along all right with his brother. But he was aware that in Ernie's present mood, there was infinite danger in bringing him and Matthew together.

But at last he shrugged. Hell, it was too good a plan to discard because someone might get hurt. Whatever happened, Al himself would be guiltless, for he would take no part whatever. What happened would be between Matthew and Ernie.

He got up and walked across the scalding heat of the yard to the corral. Saddling his horse, he swung up and rode out in the direction of Cedrino. He wanted a drink, maybe two; maybe more than that.

As he rode, he tried to rationalize the deep feeling of foreboding that clung to his thoughts, and failed. Perhaps if he had known that he was not the only man with a plan for Saturday night, it would have been different. He would have known the reason for the foreboding, and would quickly have abandoned his plan.

But he knew nothing of Olaf Hunnicutt's

plan for trapping Ernie. So he went ahead, in his thoughts, grimly determied that this chance for which he had waited so long would not escape him. . . .

Cedrino lay like a sore on the bosom of the desert, ugly, dirty, hot and almost treeless. In the exact center of town was the plaza, a block square. It was intended to be a park, but it was only a weed-grown lot, baked and blistering in the afternoon sun.

Dusty streets surrounded the plaza and, facing it on all four sides, were the town's business establishments. One building only rose above the others—the adobe-walled Mission with its adobe bell tower. In the center of the weed-grown park was a statue of some early day Spanish conquistador, and a sagging plank bandstand.

Facing north, on the south side of the plaza were the saloons, perhaps a dozen in all, ranging from the Mescal, where a peon could buy a drink for a half-dime, to the Horsehead, the best, where the floors were clean and whisky good.

Before the Horsehead, Ernie Waymire racked his horse. He looped the reins over the hitch-rail and stepped into the shade of the covered walk. A dusty white dog sat beside the door, idly scratching behind one ear with a listless hind leg. A Mexican sat on the walk with his back against the wall. His straw sombrero was tilted over his face and he was snoring lightly.

Sweat stained Ernie's shirt, beaded his forehead. He thumbed back his hat, then took it off and ran a hand through his damp hair.

THERE was perhaps a sort of reaction in him from the fight with Matthew. He felt drained of strength, lost, cut loose from all things that were familiar. With a quick, resolute movement, he shouldered his way into the saloon. It was empty save for Rod Garcia, the barkeep, and Oliver Kirby, who stood negligently at the long bar and toyed with an empty shot glass.

Ernie went to the bar, conscious of his beat-up appearance. He grinned at Garcia and said, "Draw me a beer, Rod. It's hot."

Garcia was round and fat. He wore a long black mustache. When he grinned, he showed Ernie a mouthful of gold teeth. The teeth were a vanity with him, a measure of the success he had found in life. They were simply gold crowns over perfectly sound teeth, because Garcia thought they were pretty.

He drew a beer in a heavy mug, waited a moment, then scraped the foam off the top of the glass with a polished stick. He shoved it along the bar toward Ernie. He did not remark upon the condition of Ernie's face.

Ernie drank half the beer, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He threw a glance at Kirby, found the man regarding him with a speculative smile.

Kirby was a small man, dressed in a cream-colored linen suit. He wore a black string tie at the collar of his pleated shirt. A wide-brimmed, cream-colored stetson sat on the bar before him. His hair was thinning and gray, worn long on the back of his neck.

He was a lawyer, and his voice, when he

MEAN TO THE END

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BILL BARTON was going to be hanged in a few days. His soon-to-be widow visited him in the Pala Pinto jail and asked, "Will it be all right for me and the children to attend the hanging?"

The condemned man replied, "I'd just as soon you didn't!"

His wife huffily retorted, "That's just like you, Bill—never wantin' us to have no pleasure in life!"

—Sam Brant

spoke, was slurred and musical, betraying his Southern origin. "So it finally happened?"

"What happened?"

Ernie liked Kirby, but he had never fully trusted the man. Kirby handled old Matthew's legal matters, and Ernie had occasionally suspected that both his and Al's boyish escapades had found a way to Matthew through Kirby.

Kirby was looking at Ernie's hands. He said, smiling gently, "You showed remarkable restraint, I would say. You let him beat you that way and never even struck back."

Something wild glowed in Ernie's eyes. He knotted his fists. He said, "This time. He won't put his hands on me again. I've left the Wheel, Mr. Kirby. Know where I can get a job?"

He was thinking of Irene, and becoming aware that he had absolutely nothing to offer her. Today was Friday, tomorrow Saturday. Before tomorrow night he had to have a job, a place to live, enough money to begin life with Irene. If she would have him now.

Kirby pulled at his lower lip, a nervous, thoughtful gesture. He picked up his hat and settled it on his head.

He said, "Come on over to the office, and let's talk about that. You sure you have to leave the Wheel?"

Ernie nodded. There was a certain unreality to the complete wildness of his feelings. He was remembering the solid crack of Matthew's fists as they crashed into his unprotected face. He was remembering the sadistic pleasure he had seen in Matthew's thin, tight features. He said, "If he ever tries that again, I'll kill him."

Kirby pursed his lips. "Harsh words that you don't mean, Ernie. You'll get over it. Come on."

They came out into the blistering heat of the street. Ernie winced. The dog still sat by the door, and as Ernie stepped out, he began to scratch again at his sore and flea-bitten ear. The Mexican still snored lightly against the wall.

Not speaking, the two walked along the shaded, brick-paved walk until they reached Kirby's office. Next to it was the sheriff's office, and beyond that, the two-storied adobe hotel.

KIRBY kicked open his office door and waited for Ernie to go inside. He found a box of cigars, black ones, and offered one. Ernie took it and lighted up.

Kirby took off his hat and coat and sat down at his roll-top desk.

Ernie was looking out across the plaza through the small window. He was thinking how damned empty Cedrino was in the early hours of afternoon. Later, things would pick up. The townspeople would parade around the plaza in the cool of evening, and the saloons would fill. Music would drift from their open doors, and liquid, Spanish voices would be singing.

Kirby asked abruptly, "How much money you got?"

Ernie laughed. "Ten dollars."

"What was the fight about?"

Ernie said, "I was out late. He wanted to know where, and I told him it was none of his damned business."

"A woman?"

"Maybe."

Kirby chuckled. He said, "It had to come."

He got up and went over to his small iron safe. He swung open the door, and when he straightened, he had a small canvas sack in his hand. He tossed it at Ernie, and Ernie, with a movement that was automatic, caught it.

"What's this?"

"A couple of hundred. You've got to live."

"Whose is it?" The money was solution for Ernie's problems, but a nagging suspicion troubled him.

"Call it a payment on your back wages. You've been working on the Wheel for eleven years. At thirty a month, that's—let's see—close to four thousand. I'll bet you haven't drawn over a hundred or two in all that time." There was an enigmatic smile on Kirby's face, partly obscured by his flowing gray mustache.

Ernie shoved the sack across the desk. "I can hear him laughing if I tried to collect," he said.

"You're entitled to something. Take it. I'll see that Matthew agrees to it."

Ernie wavered. He said, "Well—"

Kirby shoved the sack into his hands. It had a heavy, solid feel to it. A man was entitled to something, after eleven years.

Coming to his decision, Ernie shoved the small sack into his pocket, and stood up. If it had been only himself, he would have clung stubbornly to his pride and refused. But there was Irene to think about, too.

He said, "All right. It will be a help, sure enough. But this is all. This is all I want."

Kirby shrugged, smiling. His eyes were genial, yet somehow hooded and careful, too. Ernie shook his hand, finding it small and delicately formed.

He said, "Thanks, Mr. Kirby," and went out the door.

IV

ERNIE paused for a moment before the lawyer's office, getting used to the scalding heat after the cool of the dark office. He saw Al ride into town, saw him rack his sweated horse before the Horsehead. He half turned that way, then halted. Al entered the saloon without glancing toward him.

The two hundred in gold was a solid and comforting weight in Ernie's pocket. But he wished he could quit feeling guilty about taking it. Hell, Matthew owed it to him. That and a lot more that he'd never see.

He became conscious suddenly that he was hungry. He squinted up at the sun, deciding that it must be about three. He'd had nothing but a couple of cups of coffee since supper last night. No wonder he was hungry.

There was only one place in Cedrino where he ever ate. A little restaurant a block off the plaza, run by Ramon Ortiz' sister, Rosalia. He headed toward it.

Now the town was beginning to come to life. A woman came to the door of her adobe hut and dumped a bucket of slop into the street. A couple of dogs rose from the dust on the shady side of the hut and sniffed at it curiously. An oldster, hobbling along on a cane, spoke to Ernie pleasantly in a cracked old voice: *"Buenas dias, señor."*

"Buenas dias."

Ernie reached the restaurant and went inside. Always, inside these thick-walled 'dobe buildings, it was cooler. The place was furnished with iron-legged chairs and tables. Each table had a bright cloth on it. Ernie pulled up a chair and sat down. He could smell the spicy enchiladas and tortillas, the chile.

Ernie had been raised in this country. He had acquired a taste for hot, Mexican food, even in hot weather. He yelled, "Hey, Rosalia!" and a slight smile curved his mouth.

"Hey, yourself." Rosalia came out of the kitchen, smiling, but her smile froze when she saw Ernie's face. "Ernie! What happened?"

"I spoke up when I should have shut up," Ernie grinned at her.

She was two or three inches shorter than Irene. Her hair was jet black, having almost a blue sheen to it, and was drawn into a demure bun on her white neck. Her eyes were large, filled now with sympathy. Her lips, not having much color, were soft and full.

She said, "Your father?"

Ernie nodded. Somehow, her sympathy embarrassed him. He said, "I'll recover, but not unless I get something to eat."

"What do you want?" She was like this, sensing his moods, fitting herself to them. "I've been cutting up part of a hindquarter of beef. I could fry you a nice sirloin steak."

"Fine. That sounds just right."

Rosalia half turned, then came around to face him again. Her expression held a certain angered outrage. She said, "He's got no right to do that to you."

"He won't do it again."

Fear leaped into her eyes for the briefest instant. Then it went away. She asked, "You've left?"

Ernie nodded. Rosalia hesitated a moment more. Then she turned, saying, "I'll get your steak. Then we can talk."

Ernie tugged his sack of tobacco from his pocket and shaped a cigarette. In a moment, he could hear the steak sizzling as she dropped it into a skillet, and after another,

could smell its rich, tantalizing aroma. He was ravenous, all at once.

He smoked the cigarette, got up and tossed the butt out the door. As he had returned to his table, Rosalia came in, carrying a plate with the steak on it, and a side dish of enchiladas.

ERNIE said, "Looks good," and began to eat.

Rosalia pulled out a chair across from him and sat down. Ernie ate with a studied concentration, not talking, and Rosalia watched him. Her eyes scanned his face, almost caressingly, but she lowered them hastily when he looked up. He finished, pulled his coffee over in front of him and began to build another smoke.

He smiled. "That's better."

"Did you get enough?"

Ernie nodded. A silence fell between them while he finished making the cigarette, while he puffed it alight.

Rosalia's hands twisted in her lap. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Ernie grinned. "Why not?" He colored slightly, finally saying, "I've been seeing Irene Hunnicutt."

Rosalia's hands clenched tightly together, but her face was composed. "And Matthew found out?"

"No. He jumped me about being out late. He didn't know about Irene." He began to smile. "Good thing he didn't, I guess, judging from the fuss he kicked up just because I was out late and wouldn't tell him where." His face sobered. "He used his fists on me. Somehow, I couldn't fight back."

Rosalia's hand came across the table and touched one of his big, weathered ones. "Of course you couldn't. What are you going to do now?"

"Marry Irene. Get a job. Find a place to live."

He stared into his coffee. He did not see the spasm of pain that ran across Rosalia's face. When he did look up, she was as composed as ever.

She said, almost inaudibly, "I wish you luck."

"Thanks." He fished in his pocket for a coin and laid it on the table. He found his hat and crammed it down on his head, grinned, and chucked Rosalia under the chin. "You always make a man feel better. Whoever gets you will be lucky."

He went back out onto the blistering street. He was surprised to realize that a great deal of the depression had left him. He found himself looking forward to Saturday night with excitement.

He went along the walk to the Plaza. The door of the sheriff's office was ajar. Nate Gunlock, the sheriff, recognized him and bellowed:

"Ernie! Come here a minute!"

Ernie went back and pushed open the door. Gunlock stared at him, but did not show quite the degree of surprise Ernie might have expected. Gunlock was a big man, over six feet one. He was gaunt, but his bones were big, his whole frame big. His eyes were bright blue, surrounded by crow's feet of genial humor. His mouth was wide and straight.

He asked, "What'd you tie into?"

"Matthew."

"Whip him?"

"No. I didn't fight him."

Gunlock stared at him speculatively. "Now what?"

"I left the Wheel. I'm looking for a job."

Gunlock snorted. "You're a damned fool. The Wheel will be part yours some day. Don't let him drive you out."

Ernie felt a rising irritation. "How many times do you think a man ought to stand up and let someone pound on him? You think I haven't got a temper? If I stayed there and he tried that again, I think I'd kill him. Then where would I be?"

Gunlock scratched his thinning hair. "Maybe you're right." He stared at Ernie for a long time. "You're a good cowman. You want to go out to my place and look after things? Thirty a month and beans. It'd save me riding out there every couple of days, and things'd get taken care of better."

THE SHERIFF had a small outfit out at the edge of the desert, at the foot of the Spanish Peaks, thirty miles away. For

fifteen years he had been putting whatever he could save from his pay into cattle, and now he had around a hundred head.

Ernie said, feeling a sudden lift and showing it, "All right. That sounds fine. But I thought you were going to retire this year."

Gunlock shrugged. His grin was shamefaced. "I guess I'm too lazy. I guess I'd rather pound a swivel chair than a saddle, after all."

A sudden idea occurred to Ernie. It would explain Gunlock's lack of surprise at seeing his bruised face. He said, "You've been talking to Oliver Kirby, haven't you?"

Gunlock colored faintly, but he nodded. He said quickly, "But it ain't altogether Kirby's idea. I been needing a man."

Ernie said, "All right. I need the job, too. Thanks. I'll go out there tomorrow." He turned toward the door, but hesitated then, turning back. "I'm going to get married," he said. "I'll have a wife with me out there."

"Rosalia?"

Ernie shook his head, faintly puzzled. Why did Gunlock think it might have been Rosalia?

He said, "Irene Hunnicutt."

Gunlock whistled. He said, "Boy, it's a good thing you did leave the Wheel. It's a good thing you did."

"That's what I figured," Ernie said drily.

He thanked Gunlock again and went outside. If he hadn't planned to meet Irene tomorrow, he would have ridden out to Gunlock's place this evening. But it was too far for him to make another ride back tomorrow, so after hesitating a moment more, he went into the hotel and engaged a room.

He knew he should be elated at the way things had turned out. With scarcely any effort on his part, he had acquired a considerable sum of money and a good job. Perhaps it was the very ease with which both things had been accomplished that fostered the uneasiness in him. Frowning, he tramped down the dark, cool corridor toward his room. . . .

To forestall any idea Matthew might get of going to Cedrino and hunting Ernie up before Saturday night, Al Waymire waited until after supper Saturday to mention the tryst Ernie had with Irene.

He felt like grinning, but he was nervous, too. To Matthew, finishing his coffee at the long, kitchen table, he said:

"I found out something you ought to know."

Matthew looked up, frowning at Al's tone. "What's that?"

"It's about Ernie. I found out where he was the other night. I figured you'd want to know."

"Damn it, speak up! Where was he?"

"On the bluff above Hunnicutt's. He's been meeting Hunnicutt's girl, Irene."

Al could feel the sweat breaking out on his body as he watched his father's narrow face go white. Matthew's hand froze on the handle of his coffee cup. For what seemed an eternity he was utterly motionless. Then the color returned to his face, suffusing it. That fast and dangerous pulse began to beat in his forehead.

He said hoarsely, "How'd you find that out?"

"I followed him the other night."

Matthew was on his feet. He moved like a cat, swiftly, without waste motion. His chair overturned behind him. He grasped the front of Al's shirt and yanked his son's face close to his own. His eyes were chips of ice.

"Damn you, why didn't you tell me before?"

Al shrugged, trying to squirm free. "I was trying to figure out what was the right thing to do. Ernie's my brother."

IT WAS a good explanation, one that Matthew could understand. But in spite of Matthew's towering rage, Al had a feeling that his father despised him for his betrayal of Ernie.

With a violent, savage movement, Matthew shoved Al half across the room.

Matthew's hands were shaking violently. He staggered, recovered only by clutching the edge of the table. Al waited until he seemed to be in control of himself before he said:

"He's going to meet her again tonight."

Matthew's face was distorted, a mask of hatred and rage. He held his voice to a low, intense monotone. "Saddle two horses."

"Horses?" Al pretended not to understand what Matthew had in mind.

Matthew started across the room toward him. Al thought, He's crazy! My God, he's plain crazy! and backed away toward the door.

Matthew roared, "Damn you! Saddle a couple of horses! Can't you hear?"

"Sure. Sure. I'll get 'em."

Al scurried out of the door. His own hands were shaking, his own knees were wobbly. Sudden fear stirred in him, fear that turned his body cold and clammy. So much intensity in Matthew scared him. No man ought to hate that much.

Behind him, the house was utterly quiet. From the bunkhouse, Al could hear Ramon Ortiz idly plucking the strings of his guitar. Somewhere, out on the desert, a cow bawled.

Al roped a horse and saddled swiftly. He roped another, and was cinching down the saddle on this one when Matthew came stalking from the house.

Matthew had belted his old .44 around his waist. In his hand he carried a long, braided whip. His face was gray, his eyes as hard and merciless as polished bits of granite. He did not even look at Al. Nor did he speak.

He swung up into saddle and whirled his horse so sharply that the animal reared in fright. Matthew struck him between the ears with the loaded butt of the whip. As the horse came down, Matthew sunk his spurs into the animal's sides. Al swung up. Matthew was already across the dry bed of Gila Creek by the time he had reined around.

Al spurred his horse to a dead run, but it was almost a mile before he caught up with his father. Matthew was trotting his horse now, sitting straight and ramrod-stiff in his saddle. Al pulled up beside and slightly behind him.

Al was uncomfortable. And he was beginning to wish he'd let things alone. He was afraid now of what was going to happen. Ernie would never let Matthew's whip touch him, or Irene either.

He looked at Matthew, looked at the sides of Matthew's horse. Blood welled from the spur gashes in the animal's sides. And there was blood on Matthew's spurs.

Suddenly, more than anything else in the world, Al wanted to turn back. He had a sudden premonition of disaster. There would be more blood spilled tonight than that which was on old Matthew's spurs. And Al would bear the burden of responsibility for it. On Al's shoulders would rest the blame. . . .

DAVE and Frank Hunnicutt stood beside the big pole corral and watched Irene ride out. Dave was big and blond like his father. He stared at the slump in Irene's straight shoulders. He had not missed the dull hopelessness in her eyes. Beside him, his brother Frank laughed nastily, and started to speak.

Dave said shortly, "Shut up!" He stared at Frank. Frank had the same dark good looks which Irene possessed. But Frank had the soul of a weasel.

Frank sneered, "You act like you didn't want to do this tonight."

"I don't. She's in love with Ernie. Maybe she wasn't at first, but she is now."

Frank laughed again. "She's like all the rest of us. She's in love with the idea of owning the Wheel."

"Matthew'll never let her on the place."

Frank's grin was sure and unpleasant. "If he don't, he'll wish he had. Because you and me and the old man are going along to see that he does let her come to the Wheel. If he gets killed in the ruckus, so much the better. Then there won't be any question about it."

Dave shrugged. In his mind he could see Irene's face as she had walked from the house tonight. He felt an overwhelming shame. She had a right to something better than this. She had a right to work things out in her own way with Ernie. But she wasn't going to get it.

Olaf had gone to Cedrino for a minister, and he ought to be back now. Dave shrugged and turned toward the house. He hoped that something would happen, that Olaf wouldn't get back in time. He had a feeling that if he didn't, Irene might get her chance to work things out for herself.

But his hope was short-lived. He saw Olaf's towering shape in the saddle of one of two horses approaching from the direction

of Cedrino. And he saw the dark-coated figure of the minister beside him.

Shrugging, Dave turned and walked back to the corral to saddle his horse.

V

OLAF HUNNICUTT and his two sons mounted and rode past the house on their way out. The minister, a small, frail-looking man, smiled benignly at them from the doorway. But Dave Hunnicutt thought there was doubt and uncertainty in the little man's eyes.

He looked at his father, big, hulking, bearded and roughly dressed. A Remington revolver protruded from the old man's belt. A rifle was in his saddle-boot.

Frank rode behind the old man; smaller, darker. Frank was clean-shaven, but there was a blue shadow of stubble over his pointed jaw. His eyes were set close to his nose. They were dark eyes, full of wildness and recklessness. Frank's mouth was cruel and twisted into a perpetual sneer. At Frank's hips rode two guns, two lightly seated guns with the holsters tied down. Frank fancied himself a gunslinger.

Dave, in range clothes as were the others, wore a single gun in a holster on his left side, butt forward for the cross draw.

They rode in silence, except for an occasional chuckle from Frank. The moon came up as they threaded their careful way upward. Near nine, they topped the rim. Here, they dismounted at a grunted command from Olaf. When the horses were tied, Olaf drew his sons together with a gesture.

He said softly, "No damned noise now. I don't want this to turn into a gunfight. We'll come up between them and the rim. You two keep quiet. Let me do the talking."

Frank began to chuckle again. Olaf slapped him with the back of his hand. "Shut up. Quit thinking about what you might see. She's your sister, damn you."

Frank snarled something unintelligible, and the three moved like shadows through the tangle of cedars. After ten minutes of cautious progress, Dave could make out the dark shape of a horse ahead. He touched Olaf on the arm.

"There," he whispered, and pointed.

Olaf halted. Frank, behind Dave, ran into him and muttered a low curse. Dave stared at the horse, after a few minutes made out the figure of Irene standing beside it. She seemed nervous, moving about restlessly, fidgeting.

After a moment, she moved away through the dappled shadows, but came back almost at once. Once, as moonlight struck her face, it glistened against the tears in her eyes.

Frank stirred slightly, and she glanced toward the three. But it was obvious she did not see them, although she probably knew they were here by now.

Shame stirred in Dave because he was a part of this. But he knew that with him, or without him, it would be the same. This plan had been in Olaf's mind for a long time now. As easy to talk Olaf out of this as to talk the sun out of shining on the broad desert.

Olaf hunkered down carefully against the gnarled trunk of an ancient cedar. Dave, standing, idly began to peel ribbons of bark from the trunk and shred them in his hands.

Time dragged. Shadows moved slowly as the moon traveled across the sky. Frank began to fidget until Olaf's great hand closed on his leg. Twice more, Irene left her horse, walking away in the direction from which Ernie would come. But both times she returned. The second time she was quite plainly crying, and her sobs were clearly audible.

At last there came in the sound of a horse running. That stopped, and Irene got up and ran toward the place where it had stopped. Dave could hear the soft murmur of voices, Irene's and then Ernie's.

Olaf stood up, muttering softly but viciously, "Damn her, if she warns him—"

But apparently his threat had done its work. She returned, her arm through Ernie's.

THEY heard her cry with quick alarm: "Ernie! What's happened to you? Your face!"

"I had an argument with Matthew about whether I could come and go as I pleased.

I lost the argument, but I left the Wheel." He took her in his arms. He seemed elated. He said, "Honey, we're all set. I've got a job running Gunlock's place. I've got enough money to get married and buy what we need for the house." He held her away at arms length. "Get your horse. We're going to Cedrino to get married—tonight."

Olaf nudged Dave, touched Frank with his foot.

Dave whispered, "Wait a minute," but he knew it would do no good. He could feel Olaf's anger rising, fanned by the awkward position Ernie had put him in by asking Irene to marry him.

Irene began to cry, softly at first, more audibly as her control slipped away.

Ernie asked worriedly, "What's the matter? Did I say something wrong? I thought—"

Olaf moved. He had a gun in his hand. He said, "Damn you, Waymire! I ought to kill you. Sneaking around with her behind my back."

Ernie whirled around. Irene caught his arm as it snaked toward his gun. Dave stepped out with Olaf and Frank. Of the three, only Dave had not bothered to draw his gun. Frank held both of his, steadily centered on Ernie's belly.

Ernie probably would not have drawn his gun at all, thought Dave. Now he couldn't. A spot of moonlight struck Olaf's face. Dave could see the wildness in his father's eyes, the gloating grin on his mouth. Irene was sobbing, and she kept crying:

"Don't fight them, Ernie! Don't fight them! They'll kill you."

Ernie thrust her away. "Would that be so bad?"

He might have said more. But he had no chance. From behind him came a crashing of brush, and Matthew's enraged roar: "By hell, I'll fix you all!"

A shot spat wickedly in the tangle of cedars from which the voice had come. Dave's hand snaked his gun out of its holster as he leaped aside. He found immediate cover behind the trunk of a cedar. Olaf stayed in the open.

Matthew came charging out of the darkness, his gun spitting orange flame as fast as he could trigger it. He was making an odd sound, half-snarl, half-roar. Dave felt his eyes widen with amazement. He held his gun but he did not fire it. Matthew made an elusive, half-seen target in the dappled darkness, but it would not be that way long. He was coming forward at a run.

Ernie pushed Irene away from him so violently that she fell to the ground. She crawled away until she was close against the gnarled and exposed roots of a cedar. Ernie moved to intercept Matthew.

Dave had not thought Olaf could move so fast. In half a dozen strides, he overtook Ernie. His gun raised, chopped down on Ernie's head. Ernie went down like a felled pine, groaned, and lay still. Irene gave a sharp cry of pity.

Matthew was only thirty feet from Olaf now. And directly behind him came Al Waymire, holding a rifle at waist height.

Dave thought, My God, they'll all get killed! But still he did not raise his gun. Olaf had planned all this, out of greed, out of a vicious desire for revenge. Let him now reap the harvest of his greed.

Olaf seemed intent on doing just that. He leveled his gun at Matthew, and the click of the hammer coming back was loud and clearly audible. Matthew dived aside. Olaf's gun thundered, and flame spat three inches from its muzzle. Behind Matthew, Al stumbled. With a crash he went to the ground, but in a moment was up again.

BUT NOW he stopped running. He walked, and he walked unsteadily. Because of the dark, his face could not be seen.

Frank was firing both guns at the elusive, moving targets that were the Waymires. Matthew turned his gun toward Frank, and Frank, hit, howled:

"Dave! Damn it, Dave, get in this."

Dave stepped out, stepped closer and brought his gun up. He wanted no part of this. Olaf and Frank were getting just what they had bargained for. But family loyalty forced him whether he liked it or not. He just couldn't stand aside and see either Frank or Olaf cut down.

Suddenly came that odd, distinctive noise,

that sound a bullet makes when it smacks solid flesh. Al went down as if he'd been clubbed.

Frank yelled triumphantly, "Got that one! I got Al!"

Matthew whirled. He ran a few steps back to where Al lay, looked down, then knelt and touched his son. He seemed utterly oblivious of the guns spitting behind him.

Dave yelled, "Frank! Quit it! Al's hurt!"

The grim humor of that escaped him entirely. The cry came out of him automatically. It was an instinctive cry, dredged out of his boyhood in which the play stopped when someone got hurt. But this was not play. This was reality.

Matthew got up and turned around. For an instant he stood illuminated by moonlight, and his face was terrible to see. In the moon glow it was blue-gray. But the eyes were alive, blazing. Hot eyes. Eyes of a man who wanted to kill.

Frank was reloading one of his guns with fumbling, frantically anxious fingers. Olaf stared at Al, lying on the ground, then at Matthew.

He said, "Matt, is he dead?" He held his gun straight down at his side.

Matthew nodded. His voice had a terrible quality to it. It shook. He said, "Yes, he's dead." He swayed, as though a strong wind was blowing against him. A spasm of pain crossed his face. His gun dropped from his nerveless fingers. He toppled and fell across Al's body.

Olaf breathed, "He was hit, after all! I didn't see how we could miss him as often as we shot at him."

Dave felt drained of feeling. His knees were trembling violently. He shoved his unfired gun back into holster.

Frank said complainingly, "Dave didn't even shoot."

Olaf didn't seem to care. He stood hesitantly for a moment, plainly appalled at the damage that had been done, at the suddenness with which the violence had stopped. He pulled himself out of this with an effort. The shock wore off, the surprise. He began to laugh.

He turned and spoke to Dave, "You and Frank load Ernie on one of the horses. We're keeping that preacher waiting."

Dave walked away, filled with sudden disgust. Two men lay dead back there, another lay unconscious. Yet Olaf could laugh. His shouted laughter followed Dave as he walked swiftly through the cedars toward the rim. Dave shuddered. The insane roar of Olaf would not let him alone.

"The Wheel! It's ours! By the gods, boys, the Wheel is ours!"

Dave untied the horses and led them back. Irene still sat between two huge tangled roots of the cedar where she had fallen. She was not crying now. She was utterly silent.

STRICTLY FROM HUNGER

•

THE old colored gent sat in the squeaky rocking chair on the porch of the little shack and watched a rooster pursue a hen round and round the house. A young girl came out of the house and sprinkled grain in the middle of the path chosen by the racing fowls.

Dashing across the chicken yard, the hen ignored the grain and continued her flight. The rooster, however, stopped and started to peck at the feed.

"Oh, Lawdy," the old man murmured softly, "Ah hopes Ah never gets as hungry as all that!"

—Howie Lasseter

Dave handed the reins to Frank and went over to her. He stooped, caught her beneath her arms and raised her to her feet. Her eyes were wide with shock, her face deathly pale. Her voice was like that of a sleep-walker.

"Is he dead?"

"Ernie? Huh-uh, honey. Ernie's all right. You're going to marry him tonight."

"He doesn't want me."

"Sure he does. I heard him ask you."

"That was before—" A long shudder went through her.

DAVE put his arm around her. He led her over to where her own horse was tied. Behind him, Olaf and Frank hoisted Ernie's limp body into the saddle of one of the horses.

Olaf said, "Dave, ride behind Irene. See she don't try nothing. We're using your horse for Ernie anyway."

Frank asked, "What about them?" and gestured with his head at Matthew and Al.

"Leave 'em be. We'll come back after 'em when Ernie's one of the family."

Dave lifted Irene into her side saddle and swung up behind her. The horse fidgeted, but Dave's iron hand held his head up. He reined around and started toward the trail. Behind him, he could hear Frank and Olaf, still tying Ernie's body down.

Sick with disgust, Dave rode on. Irene was trembling, as if she were cold. But her tears had stopped.

Dave was almost out of earshot when he heard Frank ask, "What'd you mean, the Wheel is ours? Ernie's still alive. You going to kill him, too?"

And he heard Olaf's laugh, the laugh he was growing to hate. "Hell, we don't have to kill him. He's a wanted man. You seen him kill Matthew, didn't you? He wouldn't let Matthew beat him no more, and he killed him."

So that was it? Marry Irene to Ernie, giving her a claim on the Wheel. Send Ernie to running, wanted for Matthew's murder. Then the whole Hunnicutt family could move in at the Wheel.

Dave had to admit that it was so simple it couldn't help but work. Al's death would also be laid to Ernie. Ernie wouldn't stand much chance if they caught him. He probably wouldn't even go to trial. This was wild country and folks would stand for a lot of things. But they wouldn't stand for a man killing his own father and brother. They'd shove the sheriff aside and hang Ernie from the nearest cottonwood.

Fate had played perfectly into Olaf's hands tonight. He had planned a part of this, but the presence of Matthew and Al had been pure luck.

As he had wondered so many times before, Dave wondered again at what it was that had been between Matthew and Olaf, at what could have caused them to hate each other so violently.

He started down the trail, hearing the noise made by the other three horses behind him. He heard the racket of shots as Olaf emptied Ernie's gun into the ground. Below winked the light in the windows of the Hunnicutt ranch house.

Whatever the cause of the hatred that had festered so long in Olaf's mind, it was wiped out now. At the cost of Irene's happiness, and perhaps of her sanity. At the cost of Ernie's life with her. At the cost of Al Waymire's life, as well as Matthew's.

What should have stayed strictly between Matthew and Olaf had spread to encompass all of Olaf's family and all of Matthew's, as well. Nor was it through spreading.

Dave wished Irene would cry. She was like stone in the saddle before him now, stiff and cold and unmoving.

He said, "Honey, don't worry. It'll work out some way."

She shook her head slowly, dazedly. "He'll hate me. He'll blame me for Matthew's death and for Al's. He'll blame me."

Dave said, "No he won't."

But he knew he was lying. For every time Ernie entered a strange town furtively, he'd be blaming her. Every time he had to leave one hastily, he'd be blaming her. He'd blame her because he couldn't sleep soundly, and he'd hate her every time a wanted dodger caught up with him. That would be natural and inevitable.

But there was no changing it. Even if he'd thought it would do any good, Dave

knew he could never betray his own kin. He couldn't turn Olaf and Frank over to the law to save Ernie. So Ernie would have to run. It was the only way.

HE RODE directly to the house when they arrived. He slipped to the ground and lifted Irene down. Her apathy scared him, as did the staring look in her eyes.

He said, "Go on in, honey. I'll be back as soon as I take care of your horse."

The minister came to the door. His smile was not so benign now. There was plain fright in his eyes. But he was gentle with Irene, perhaps sensing that she was as much a victim here as he was. Again, Dave felt the stir of shame.

He led Irene's horse across the yard to the corral, offsaddled, and turned the horse in. Then he trudged back toward the house.

Olaf and Frank came into the yard off the trail, and Dave helped untie Ernie and lift him down. Ernie groaned and stirred, but he could not stand up. Olaf laughed and tossed him across one shoulder. He carried him into the house. Dave followed.

Olaf said, "Here's the groom. Throw some water in his face so's we can get on with it." To Frank, standing in the doorway, he said irritably, "Take care of the horses."

The minister looked at Ernie, slumped in the chair where Olaf had dumped him. His face was pale. He said, "I don't know—I don't think I will perform any ceremony here. There is something wrong."

Olaf grabbed his shoulder. Olaf's fingers bit deep, and the minister winced with pain.

Olaf said, "The hell you won't!"

He flung a dipper of water into Ernie's face. Ernie gasped, shook his head and opened his eyes. Olaf went across the room and yanked Irene to her feet. He dragged her over to Ernie.

Then he said, "Get on with it. We ain't got all night."

VI

THE MINISTER hesitated, holding his heavy Bible. Olaf's face darkened. He put a hand on his gun. Irene took Ernie's hand hastily and drew him to his feet. Ernie was barely conscious, but he could stand.

Irene looked at the minister and said, "You had better do it. It's all right. I love the man you're to marry me to. I—I'll make him as good a wife as I can."

The minister seemed relieved. He opened his book. But he was still trembling, and his voice was not steady.

" 'Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God to join this man and this woman in holy wedlock—' "

Irene could feel tears welling into her eyes. The words were beautiful.

"Do you, Irene, take this man to your lawful wedded husband, to love, honor and obey in sickness and in health so long as you both shall live?"

"I do." Irene could not keep a sob out of her voice.

"Do you, Ernest, take this woman—to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, so long as you both shall live."

Ernie shook his head, as if to clear it. Olaf's gun prodded him viciously in the spine, and the click of the hammer going back seemed thunderous and ominous in the silent room.

Irene looked up. Ernie was scowling. A stubborn look was in his eyes. He was beginning to comprehend, through the dizziness and pain in his head, what they were doing to him. He could not know that Al and Matthew were dead. He looked down at Irene, his eyes blazing. He turned around and looked at Olaf. Olaf prodded again.

Irene stared at her father. She could see the wildness growing there. Olaf's brain wasn't working now. Only his instinct and feelings. If Ernie refused, Olaf's bullet would tear through him!

Irene's hand tightened on Ernie's arm. She looked up at him. He might not heed her plea now, hating her, but she had to try. She had to try and save his life. She begged, "Please, Ernie! Please!"

He looked back at the minister. It took a moment for his face to settle, for the rage and hatred to go out of it. At last he said, "I do."

The rest of it was mercifully short. And

at last the minister said, "I now pronounce you man and wife." He slammed his Bible shut and looked around frantically. He was like a rabbit, terrified, on the point of heedless flight.

Olaf's laugh boomed out. He roared, "Frank! Take the man back to town. Stop and see Nate Gunlock. Tell 'em what Ernie's done."

Ernie swung around. His mind was apparently getting clearer all the time. He said, "What have I done?"

"What've you done?" Why you damned fool, don't you remember? You killed Al, and then you killed Matthew. I slugged you, but I was too late to stop you."

Ernie's hand snaked his gun out of its holster. He backed toward the door. He said, "I don't know what's going on, but I haven't killed anybody."

Olaf laughed. "Go ahead. Run. It's all you can do now. Frank and Dave and me all saw you kill Matthew and Al both. Look at your gun. It's empty."

Ernie glanced down at his gun. A look of surprise came over his face. He felt for shells in his empty belt. Again, he shook his head. A hand went up to feel gingerly of the lump which Olaf's gun-barrel had put on it.

Irene wanted to cry. Ernie looked at her. She had never seen so much hatred in anyone. It seemed to wither her soul.

Ernie said, his voice bitter and harsh, "You're a part of it, too. It was all a rotten game, wasn't it? All you wanted was the Wheel." He strugged, but the hatred in his eyes didn't lessen. "You've got it now. But I'll be back. I'll get things figured out, then I'll be back."

He backed through the door. Irene could hear the sounds that Frank made, leaving with the minister for Cedrino.

Olaf laughed again. He bellowed, "Let 'im go, Frank."

Ernie ran halfway across the yard toward the corral, then slowed to a walk. Olaf went out to watch him. Irene and Dave followed. She wanted to call out, she wanted to run and catch up with Ernie, to beg, to plead, to make him believe her. She wanted to tell him how this had really happened.

But she knew it was not only deadly dangerous for them both, but useless as well. What good would it do Ernie to know that Olaf and Frank had killed his father and brother? He'd figure that out for himself as soon as his head cleared. And how could she justify herself to Ernie? She couldn't. She was just what he thought she was. She had done just what he had accused her of doing. Her shoulders slumped.

Olaf called mockingly, "Take the best horse there, Ernie. You'll need him. Besides, nothing's too good for the ex-owner of the Wheel."

Irene thought for a moment that Ernie would come back. But he must have begun to perceive the enormity of the evidence that was stacked against him. He mounted and rode away without a backward glance.

ERNIE'S head felt as if it were an anvil on which a blacksmith was regularly beating with his hammer. It throbbed, and each time it did, his vision blurred. Just beyond the yard he halted, overcome by nausea. He dismounted quickly and retched. Pale and sweating, he remounted and nudged the horse ahead.

It hurt him to think, but he had to. He had to figure what was happening, and most of all, he had to figure a way out of it.

It was a distinct shock to think of both Matthew and Al dead. He tried to supply the gaps in his memory. He'd ridden into the cedars to meet Irene. He'd met her and she'd been crying. He'd asked her to marry him.

It was coming back now, slowly and hazily. His memory had an aura of unreality to it.

Olaf and Frank and Dave had jumped out of the darkness. He could remember Olaf cursing him. Then he could recall gunshots, and Matthew's crazy, enraged voice. He'd started for Matthew—

That was it. That was all he could remember.

In a half daze, he thought, maybe I did do it. Maybe I thought Matthew was going to work me over again. Maybe I did kill him.

He became aware that his horse had

halted, had dropped his head to graze. The horse was moving from one clump of grass to the next, tugging, yanking. It took half a dozen plants to make a mouthful. Ernie pulled the horse's head up, and touched his ribs with his spurs. The horse moved out briskly then, and Ernie kept him moving, kept his head up.

He had no idea at all where he was going. Desperately he forced his mind to work just a little longer. He decided that the only logical place to head for would be the Spanish Peaks at the edge of the desert. He'd stop and get some sleep and grub at Nate Gunlock's place. Nate would be scouring the desert for him. But he probably wouldn't look at his own ranch until it was too late.

WITH his destination decided, Ernie sagged in his saddle, half-dozing. His chin dropped down onto his chest. He had a bad concussion, but he didn't know that. All he knew was that his head hurt terribly, that he was nauseated, and that he could hardly stay awake.

Even his horror at the predicament he was in seemed unreal to him now. Like a dream. Like an awful bad dream.

Dazed as he was, his mind would not let the problem alone. The hours passed, and horse and man crawled across the desert, bathed with the weird glow of moonlight. Riding became a nightmare for Ernie, a nightmare of tortured thoughts, of pounding pain in his head. With each step the horse took, the pain seemed to increase.

Dawn came, gray and cold. The eastern sky turned pink, and the sun poked its way above the broad, flat desert. The glare of the sun against the land brought new waves of dizzying pain to Ernie's head.

But at last he made it. At last he raised the log shack that was Gunlock's ranch house. He dismounted before the ramshackle log shelter that served as a barn, watered his horse in the creek beside it.

He lay down, belly-flat on the ground and sucked up water himself while the horse drank. He sloshed the cool water over his head, into his face. He tried to wash away some of the clotted blood in his hair over the knot, but abandoned this because the spot was too sore.

When he rose, he led the horse into the barn. He clawed a feed of hay out of the loft for the animal and unsaddled him. Then, shutting the door, he made his way, staggering, toward the house.

He didn't even bother to remove his boots. He fell across the dusty, dirty bunk and immediately lost consciousness.

It was dark when he awoke. Fear clawed at him because he did not immediately place his surroundings. Moonlight shone in the door, laying a square of illumination on the dirt floor. Ernie's head felt light, but it no longer ached. Without moving, he stared around at the dimly lighted cabin.

It began to come back. Irene, Olaf and his sons, Matthew and Al. The marriage ceremony. His flight. He sat up abruptly. He expected the pound of pain to recommence in his head, but it did not. He made a wry grin at that.

He realized now that he was ravenous. He wondered what time it was and wandered out through the door to look at the moon. It lay low on the western horizon.

Ernie grunted, "Be getting light soon."

He stared around. In far distance he heard the lonely howl of a wolf. The creek, narrow and small, made its cheerful, gurgling noise down by the barn. Behind the cabin, the Spanish Peaks loomed up, ghostly and unreal. Ernie's horse made small stirring sounds from the barn.

Ernie walked to the creek and got down to drink. The water was sweet and cold. He drank until he thought he would burst.

Returning to the cabin, he found a candle and lighted it. It occurred to him with a shock that he was a wanted man, that he was a fool to show a light here. The realization that he was wanted for the murder of his father and brother was a bitter pill to swallow. He blew out the candle, went to the door and listened intently. He began to know the terror of a hunted animal.

A sudden, wild rage possessed him. Dark-eyed, hollow-cheeked, intent and bitter, he made a savage, lean shape in the doorway of the old cabin. With an impatient gesture, he stepped back and closed the door.

HE WENT over and relighted the candle, then stared about with questing, hungry eyes. He found a box of .38-caliber cartridges that would fit the Colt's conversion in a cupboard. Beside the cartridges were several cans of beans and a small sack of coffee. An empty bean can contained sugar, which was covered and protected by a piece of newspaper stuffed into it on top of the sugar.

In one corner of the room was a gunnysack. Ernie got it and stuffed the canned goods into it. The coffee and sugar followed. He found a can of lard and some flour and took that, too. Ernie missed his rifle, but there was no help for that. It was back at Hunnicutt's in his saddle-boot.

Prodded by his uneasiness, he shouldered the sack and went outside. He saddled his horse, tied the sack on behind, and again watered the thirsty animal in the creek. Then he swung up into saddle and took the trail that headed up toward the Spanish Peaks behind the cabin.

He had a bleak vision of what lay ahead of him now. Running and more running. Nothing else. Every sheriff and town marshal would be his enemy. Sound sleep would become a thing unknown to him. He must live forever with his hand close to his gun.

He thought of the vast acres that comprised the Wheel, of the thousands of cattle that roamed this land and carried the Wheel brand on their hips. And he thought of the Hunnicutts and Irene, entrenched firmly in the Wheel ranch house.

He admitted at last that he was a fool. He should have blankly refused to marry Irene last night. He considered this for a moment, then shook his head. Irene had not been the only one to look into Olaf Hunnicutt's eyes last night. Irene had not been the only one to see the murder there. If Ernie had refused to marry her, he would not be here now. Olaf had planned too long. Pure animal rage at being frustrated would have tightened his finger on the trigger.

Ernie's mind was like a coyote in a cage, questing back and forth ceaselessly for an opening in the cage. But there was no opening. There was no hope that things could ever be different than they now were.

And with this realization, Ernie Waymire knew sudden and complete despair.

VII

STANDING in front of the house Olaf watched Ernie ride away. He saw him pause at the edge of the yard, heard the sound of his retching. He grinned. Dave stood at his shoulder, frowning.

Olaf swung around and asked, "What was the matter with you up there? Scared you'd get hurt?"

Dave's frown deepened. "I didn't like what you were doing. I don't like it a damned bit better now."

"But you'll come along with the rest of us to the Wheel, won't you? You don't mind getting the benefit from what I'm doing." Olaf was mocking.

Dave shrugged. Irene had gone into the house. It was utterly silent in there.

Olaf said, "We ain't through yet. There's still two bodies to be fetched in." He moved away toward the corral.

Dave threw a glance at the house, then followed reluctantly. He took his rope off his saddle and went into the corral. Roping out a big gray, he slipped a bridle onto the animal, then led him out and saddled up. He hung his rope back on the saddle.

Olaf roped out a bay mare, and when he had saddled, the two rode out of the yard.

They took the trail that led up onto the rim, and twenty mintues later came out on top. They rode at once to where the bodies of the two Waymires lay. Dave stared down at them. He had known Al pretty well, and there had been a time when he'd liked him. He wondered why he should feel so guilty about this. He'd fired no shots himself. He'd taken no active part in what had happened. But the guilt remained. He couldn't rationalize it away.

Olaf grunted, "Hunt around and find their horses. They can't be too far away."

"All right."

Dave reined his horse around. He didn't feel any particular regret about Matthew Waymire. Matthew had been thoroughly

disliked by everyone who had known him even slightly. So far as Dave knew, Matthew had had no redeeming traits at all. He had been hard as nails, cruel, narrow-minded, egotistical. He had been soured with hatred and with bitter memory.

What memory? What had been between Olaf and Matthew?

His horse pricked his ears forward, turning his head to the right. Dave reined him that way, and a few minutes later heard a whinny from directly ahead of him.

He found Ernie's horse and later the other Waymire horses tied to the low branch of a cedar. One of them had a dozen raw open spur gashes on each of his sides. Blood had run from the open cuts and had dried black and stiff on the animal's belly.

Dave thought, Matt was in a hurry all right.

He dismounted and untied the horses' reins. Holding them, he remounted. He heard Olaf's great voice lift in the distance.

"Dave! Dave, come here, quick!"

Dave touched spurs to his horse's sides. The reins of the led horses tightened, almost dragging him from the saddle. Then the trailing horses jumped ahead, and the reins slackened.

At a canter, which was the fastest pace at which he could lead these horses without losing them, Dave made his way back to Olaf. His father was kneeling beside the body of Matthew Waymire. Olaf looked up. His face was pale.

He said, "Matt ain't cold. Al is. Maybe Matt ain't dead."

Dave dropped the reins of the led horses and dismounted. He knelt beside Olaf, dropped his head to Matthew's chest and listened. He heard the faint, irregular beat of Matthew's heart.

Olaf said, "Well?"

"He ain't even about to be dead." Dave couldn't help grinning at the shock in Olaf's face. He couldn't help feeling an obscure pleasure at Olaf's discomfiture. He asked, "What you going to do now?"

"Maybe he'll die. Where's he hit?"

DAVE struck a match. He hunted over Matthew's chest and abdomen, but found no sign of blood. He turned Matt over and looked again. There was no wound. The match burned his fingers, and he flung it away. He lighted another and inspected Matthew's legs and arms.

He stepped on the match. "He ain't even hit."

Olaf's voice rose. It was almost a roar. "He's got to be hit! Damn it, a man don't just fall down and pass out. Not Matt's kind of a man anyway."

He pushed Dave away roughly. Dave was glad the darkness hid his grin. Olaf struck a match and looked for himself. When it burned down, he struck another. He used five matches before he was satisfied.

Dave asked, "Now what? You going to kill him?"

He didn't really believe that Olaf was that cold-blooded. He didn't believe Olaf could deliberately murder a man in cold blood.

Strangely, Olaf was trembling. Dave could see the struggle he was having with himself. He could see Olaf trying to adjust himself to this new complication.

Dave said, "Think about it later. Let's load 'em up and take 'em home."

"All right." Olaf seemed glad of the chance to postpone his decision. Dave led one of the Waymire horses over and they loaded Matt first. They loaded Al's body then, and tied it down. The horses didn't like the inert weight and they didn't like the smell of blood. But after a normal amount of fidgeting and nickering, they went along.

When they came into the ranch yard, the house was dark. Irene must have gone to bed. They led the horses up to the door. Olaf bellowed, "Irene!" and dismounted. He began to untie the lashings that held Matthew in the saddle.

Dave helped him and they lifted Matt's body down, carried it into the house. Irene was there, and had lighted a lamp. Sheer terror showed in her eyes as she stared at Matthew.

Dave said, "He ain't dead, honey. He ain't even been hit."

"What's the matter with him then?"

"I don't know."

They carried him to the long, horsehair

sofa and laid him down. Dave started to turn. A sudden, uneasy feeling stirred him and he whirled. Matthew's eyes were open, staring at him. Dave grabbed Olaf's arm.

"Look!"

Olaf turned in surprise. He stared into Matthew's bitter, hating eyes for a moment, then began to laugh. He laughed until the tears coursed down his cheeks.

He roared, "He's had a stroke! He's paralyzed. But his mind is clear. Look at his eyes!" Apparently the possibilities this offered began to unroll before him.

Dave asked, "What you going to do with him?"

"I ain't going to kill him if that's what you mean. I'm going to keep him alive." He put his face down close to Matthew's. He said, "You hear that, Matt? I'm going to keep you for a pet."

Matthew's facial muscles twitched. It was plain that he was trying to speak. He couldn't and the knowledge distilled the bitterness in his eyes into more concentrated form.

Olaf grinned at him. "We're moving to the Wheel tomorrow, Matt. We'll take you back with us." He looked at Irene, and his tone became mocking. "I don't think you two have met." He postured ridiculously. "Mr. Waymire, meet Mrs. Waymire."

Matthew's eyes looked faintly puzzled. Olaf explained, "Ernie killed Al, Matt. Ernie's on the dodge for it. But before he left, he married Irene here. She's appointed men foreman of the Wheel. You see how it is now?"

MATTHEW'S facial muscles twitched violently. At last something vital went out of them. He was helpless and he knew it. He was at the mercy of Olaf, and there was no mercy in Olaf. He knew that, too. He closed his eyes tightly and held them that way. Olaf laughed again.

Irene shuddered and ran to her room. Olaf went over and picked Matthew up. He carried him into his own bedroom and dropped him on the bed. When he came back out he bellowed at Irene's closed door:

"You take care of him! I'll sleep in the bunkhouse with the boys tonight. Tomorrow we'll have plenty of room."

Then he stalked outside, chuckling, and after a moment's hesitation, Dave followed.

It was a strange cavalcade that came straggling into Wheel headquarters at noon the following day. Olaf and Frank, grinning triumphantly, rode in the vanguard. Behind them, Irene drove a wagon loaded with personal effects. Bringing up the rear was the Hunnicutt buckboard. In the back Matthew, paralyzed, and Al, dead, rode side by side. Dave drove the buckboard. Trailing it and tied to it was a string of saddle horses tied lead rope to tail in a long line.

The sheriff, Nate Gunlock, was waiting at the Wheel, having been notified by Frank the previous night that Al and Matthew were dead. He came walking out from the house, and the crew streamed from the bunkhouse, following him.

Gunlock looked up at Olaf. "What's this?"

Olaf grinned. He jerked his head toward Irene. He said mockingly, "Meet Mrs. Ernie Waymire. Al's dead, but old Matt ain't. He needs good care. He's had a stroke. Mrs. Waymire's going to take care of him."

Gunlock scowled. "Looks to me like you're all moving in."

"We are. Hell, man, Mrs. Waymire's going to be busy with old Matt. She'll need someone to look after things. The Wheel is a big outfit. But I reckon Frank and Dave and me can look after it for her."

Gunlock chewed his lip thoughtfully. "I want to see Matt." He walked back to the buckboard. Anger stirred in his eyes. He said, "Did you have to put Al right beside him?"

Olaf couldn't seem to get the pleased grin off his face. "Why, Sheriff, you know, I never thought of that." He grunted at Frank and Dave, "Get him in the house."

Dave got down, walked around to the rear of the buckboard. Frank rode over and dismounted. He hitched at the two low-swung guns and reached for Matthew's feet. Gunlock pushed him aside. "I want to talk to Matthew."

Frank snarled, "He can't talk. He's paralyzed."

"I'll try."

Gunlock walked around to Matt's side of the buckboard. Matthew watched him. His eyes seemed to want to talk. But they were mute.

Gunlock said, "Ernie killed Al and you had a stroke. What were you trying to do to Ernie, Matt? Push him into killing you?"

The muscles of Matthew's face twitched. His eyes were frantic.

Gunlock said, "Ernie's a good man, and so was Al. I guess if you'd been more of a father to them this wouldn't have happened." He stared at Matthew thoughtfully. "I always thought I'd be glad when something happened to you, Matt. But I ain't. I'm sorry for you. You got nothing to do but think now, have you? You got to lay there and watch Olaf take over your ranch."

The eyes were desperate and the stricken's man's face twitched frantically.

Gunlock shook his head. "You're tryin' to tell me to stop Olaf, ain't you? I can't do it, Matt. I talked to the preacher that tied Ernie and Irene last night. It's legal enough. Al's dead. You're helpless and Ernie's gone. There ain't a thing in the world to stop Ernie's wife from bringing her family and moving to the Wheel." He looked at Matthew a moment longer. Finally, turning away, he said, "I'm sorry, Matt."

ONE of the Wheel punchers stopped him, drew him aside. Dave, lifting Matthew, couldn't help but hear. "I'm quitting, Nate. Who do I see?"

"Olaf," Gunlock said. "He's the boss now."

"That's what I figured. I guess I'll go see him now."

The puncher walked over to where Olaf stood. Half a dozen others followed him.

Dave went into the house, lugging Matt's head and shoulders. He and Frank carried the man into his own bedroom and laid him down on the bed. Irene came in. There was pity in her face as she looked at Matt. Dave thought it was strange about women, strange how quickly they forgot an injury or a wrong, strange how they feel sympathy for the one who had wronged them.

He guessed all women weren't like that. He stared at Irene, fussing over Matthew. He was seeing her with different eyes today. She had matured in the last couple of days. She was a woman now, not a girl.

She was the only one of the Hunnicutt tribe that amount to a damn. Dave himself hadn't even had the guts to refuse to go along with a steal like this. Maybe a word from him wouldn't bust it wide open, but it would give Gunlock something to work on.

Instinct told him, Let it ride. See what happens. He grunted with self-contempt as he went out the door. That was the easy way. But he knew that was the way he'd do it. Family loyalty was a strong tie, especially strong in the Hunnicutt family. He couldn't break it.

Outside, Olaf was paying off the crew with money he had found in old Matt's office. When that was done and they had left, only the cook and Ramon Ortiz were left.

Dave squatted against the bunkhouse wall beside Ramon and asked, "You're the only one that stayed. Why?"

Ramon grinned cheerfully. "I am a cowpuncher here. If I leave I will be something less than that. I think I stay for that."

It was all right with Dave. Dave was sweet on Ramon's sister, Rosalia. Another tie wouldn't hurt a thing. He got up. "You won't regret it, Ramon."

"I know I will not. I am sure of that." Ramon grinned at him.

Dave and Frank and Ramon began the task of unpacking the wagon and carting the stuff into the house. The Hunnicutt horses were turned out with the Wheel remuda. Gunlock watched, apparently reluctant to leave.

Dave asked, "Going after Ernie?"

"Have to." Gunlock swung up to saddle and stared down at Dave. "Luck," he said, and rode away toward Cedrino.

Dave thought, He'll stall around for three days gathering a posse. He'll comb the desert first, then move up to the Spanish Peaks. But by that time Ernie'll be clear to Colorado, and Gunlock knows it.

Well, it wasn't essential to Olaf's plan that Ernie be caught. In fact, Olaf would probably like it just as well if Ernie wasn't caught. He wouldn't come back, that was sure. Coming back would only put a noose

around his neck.

Dave marveled at the ease with which luck had dumped the Wheel into Olaf's lap. A foolproof plan. One that couldn't misfire.

Still, he couldn't feel entirely comfortable about it. He couldn't entirely banish the odd feeling of uneasiness that lingered in his mind.

Apparently Olaf couldn't either, for when supper was over, he called Dave over to the corral where they wouldn't be overheard. He said, "We need a crew. Six or eight at least. Take a packhorse and head down east to the Cherokee Strip or south into the Panhandle. I don't want an ordinary crew. I want a gun crew."

VIII

RELENTLESSLY, Ernie Waymire pushed back toward the Spanish Peaks all the first day, reaching the little mining town of Rio de Oro at nightfall. He halted long enough to purchase a pack horse and a load of supplies, then rode out again.

He camped that night in the timber, built a fire and cooked his dinner, then rolled up in his blankets. Sleep should have come easy, for he was utterly exhausted. But it did not. He kept thinking of Irene, his wife now, and he kept thinking of Olaf at the Wheel.

His anger was all the more terrible because it was helpless anger. His head began to ache again. Some time before midnight, he dropped off to sleep.

When he awoke in the morning, he cooked breakfast and mounted. All that day he climbed steadily, and at night camped at the foot of one of the Spanish Peaks. Here, at this high altitude, snow still lay banked in the shady ravines, its surface black with dust. Ernie shot an elk calf and dressed it out. He fried a couple of good-sized steaks for his supper.

The anger that had smoldered in him all day broke out again. He had to fight himself to keep from turning around, from starting back.

Again, at night, he lay awake, his mind relentlessly searching for some gap in Olaf's planning. There wasn't any.

On the following morning, he turned north, toward the Colorado border. He covered two hundred miles in a little more than a week, but every time he passed through a town he became wary. He looked with suspicion on every man who gave him a second glance.

He spent his evenings now practicing with his gun. At first he practiced only his draw, but as time went on and his speed improved, he began to practice with live ammunition.

Ernie had never given much thought to guns. He could shoot, as could almost everyone he knew. Beyond reasonable accuracy, he'd had no desire to learn. It was different now. His life might at any time depend upon how quickly he could draw his gun, how quickly and how accurately he could shoot.

To his surprise, he found that he had a natural bent for guns. He amazed himself occasionally by both his speed and his accuracy. He could break a clod in mid-air with a single shot, drawing and shooting with a single smooth motion only after the clod had left his hand.

When he came into Cordova, Colorado, in mid-afternoon one day, nearly three weeks had passed since he had left the Wheel. Cordova was not much different from a dozen towns he had passed through on the way. Perhaps a little bigger. That was all.

He stabled his horses and headed for a saloon. His clothes were travel-stained and a stubble of whiskers covered his face. He had lost nearly fifteen pounds. In his eyes was a sort of restrained fury as he banged through the batwings of the first saloon he came to, and strode to the bar.

At this time of day, the place was nearly deserted. A fat, mustached Mexican bartender was behind the bar. A couple of men were standing in front of it. Ernie ordered beer.

He drank it and ordered another. While he was drinking it, one of the men left the saloon without a glance at him. The other studied him covertly in the back-bar mirror. Ernie felt the stir of some wild instinct that had grown and matured in him during his weeks of running.

He began to think about the man who had left so suddenly, tried to remember what

the man had looked like. The instinct of warning grew in him.

He paid for his beer and had started for the door when the batwings banged open. Three men crowded in.

One of them yelled, "That's him! Don't let him get away! He's worth a thousand bucks down in New Mexico."

ERNIE'S gun was in his hand. He couldn't remember how it got there. He put a bullet into the floor in front of the nearest man. He yelled, "The next will be higher!"

He came around in a half turn. The bartender was leveling a double-barreled shotgun from behind the bar. Ernie flung a shot at him, showered his face with sharp splinters from the bar. The man who had been at the bar slowly raised his hands.

The bartender growled, "No wonder he's worth a thousand. It'd be worth more than that to take him." He held his hands above his head. The shotgun had fallen somewhere behind the bar.

Maybe this was what Ernie had needed, this tight and touchy moment. For an instant he wasn't sure but what one of the three at the door would make a play.

He said harshly, "Let go of your guns. Now! Let go of them! You're not going to get me, so don't try."

He waited, watching them, watching their nerve break. Guns clattered on the floor. Ernie made a compelling motion with his gun-barrel.

"Over by the bar," he said. "Lie down on the floor. I didn't ask you to make this try for me. I'll make you sorry you did it if you don't move."

He watched them as they surlily obeyed. He thought of his horse, of his pack animal down at the livery barn. Nearly two blocks away. He'd never make it to them, nor make it out of town with them. The horses would have to be saddled. That would take too long.

He backed out of the door, with the final warning, "Don't hurry after me. Somebody'll get hurt next time."

There was a big black gelding racked in front of the saloon. A little flashy and easy to spot, but the best horse at the rack, and Ernie had to have the best.

His mind was racing and his time was ticking away. This was the way it began. Dodgers had gone out all over the West. There wasn't a place he could hide from them. He was innocent of any crime, but he was about to become guilty of horse stealing.

Sooner or later, he'd be guilty of murder. It could have happened back there in the saloon. It could happen here, now, in this Cordova street. It could happen five miles from town if this sheriff's posse caught up with him.

But wherever it happened, it was inevitable. Sooner or later, Ernie would have to kill to preserve his freedom. And then it wouldn't matter whether he were guilty of killing Al and Matthew or not. He'd be a murderer anyway.

His decision was made as he untied the black and swung to saddle. He turned the animal south.

He hit the edge of town at a dead run. He could hear the confused shouts in the town behind him. He relaxed a little and eased up on the black. The animal slowed to a mile-eating lope. There'd be no hasty pursuit. They'd take fifteen or twenty minutes to get organized, to round up men and horses. So he had a little time.

He used it in steady, straight line running. Time enough later for evasive tactics. He glanced up at the sun, guessing the time at close to four o'clock. It wouldn't be dark until about eight, but the moon wouldn't rise until about ten.

Ernie figured if he could stay away from them until dark, he could lose them altogether between dark and moonrise. For yet another fifteen minutes he kept the horse at a steady lope, holding a straight and direct line toward the south. Off to his right were some low hills, and in the distance, the snow-clad peaks of the Divide.

He knew what it was like to be hunted now, and he didn't like it. It had put the decision up to him in a way he couldn't ignore or evade. It was a choice, now, between a losing fight back in Cedrino or a losing fight, lasting longer perhaps but just as inevitable, up here in the north.

IT WAS the difference between death when knowing he was guilty of no wrongdoing, or of death, knowing that he had killed innocent men in the process of keeping his freedom.

It was really no choice at all, for in either case the end was the same.

Ernie heard a distant shot behind him, but he didn't smile. That shot may have been at a coyote, or a deer, or at an imagined movement. It told Ernie, though, that the men behind him were dangerous. They were dangerous because they were scared—scared and excited. They weren't manhunters, most of them. Just men of the town, pressed into service by a sheriff who probably was excited himself.

He estimated that the shot was no more than a couple of miles back of him. That meant either that they had got organized quicker than he had thought they would, or that they were pushing their horses too hard. He touched the black with his spurs, and the animal responded instantly, breaking into a smooth, free-flowing run.

With no more than a couple of miles separating pursued and pursuers, there was no leeway for evasive tactics anyway, so Ernie slacked the reins and let the horse run. He glanced down at the saddle, and was surprised and pleased to find a rifle jammed snugly into the boot. He withdrew it and jacked open the action. It was loaded.

An hour passed, with no apparent increase or decrease in the distance between him and the posse. At intervals, he let his horse slow to a walk, and a couple of times he stopped entirely, allowing the animal enough time to resume his normal breathing cadence.

This care of his horse must have paid off, because as the sun sank behind the snow-clad peaks to westward, he heard another shot. This one had come from almost double the distance behind him that the first had. Not only that, but his horse was not entirely played out, and with reasonable care should carry him throughout the night.

Immediately he turned right, entering the hills. At midnight, he was forty miles south of Cordova and knew that at last he had shaken off pursuit. Since he was wanted in New Mexico, they probably had not expected him to ride south. They had figured his southerly direction to be a ruse, and had expected him to turn back north again as soon as darkness fell. That would explain his losing the posse so easily.

He watered his weary horse and picketed the animal in a lush meadow of mountain hay. He had no food for himself, so he took a long drink of water and rolled himself in his blankets.

And for the first time in many days, he slept as soon as his head touched the saddle. . . .

Daylight found him riding, refreshed, but ravenously hungry. He shot a deer, dressed it, and loaded it on his saddle. At an outlying ranch, he traded most of it for a little coffee and flour. He kept traveling.

His horse threw a shoe on the third day. Ernie had no money left, so he roped a horse out of a bunch he found, and turned the black loose. He was careful to steal horses off the range, so that he would not be trailed by the reports of stolen horses.

He avoided towns, and replenished his supplies at outlying ranches, usually by bringing in dressed game on his saddle to exchange for them. There came a day when he sighted the Spanish Peaks in the distance, and at nightfall camped at their base.

The next night found him at the edge of the desert, awaiting darkness before attempting the ride into Cedrino. The running was over, and the fighting was about to begin. . . .

SATURDAY night. From the bandstand in the Plaza came the brassy strains of a march, muted by distance. Rosalia Ortiz slipped a shawl about her shoulders preparatory to stepping out into the street. The door opened behind her.

A voice said, "Blow out the lamp and lock the door."

She whirled. "Ernie!"

He stepped across the room and blew out the lamp. Rosalia locked the door. Moonlight streamed in the window. Ernie came over to her. He was gaunt and unshaven. His eyes burned in their sockets.

Rosalia cried, "You should not have come back!"

"I got tired of running." He stared down at her. "How much of what they accuse me of do you believe?"

There was no hesitation in her. "None of it."

"What do they accuse me of now? When I left it was killing Al and Matthew."

"But Matthew isn't dead."

"What?"

"He had a stroke or something. He's out at the Wheel and Irene Hunnicutt is taking care of him."

"Then he can tell Gunlock how it really happened."

Rosala shook her head. "He's paralyzed. He can't speak."

"And Olaf? Is he at the wheel?"

"He and Frank and Dave. And four or five hired gunmen. The crew quit as soon as the Hunnicutts moved in. All except Ramon. He tells me what goes on out there."

Ernie smiled. "Then Olaf isn't sure of himself. Because if he was, he wouldn't bother with gunmen."

Rosalia said bitterly, "He gives a good imitation of being sure of himself."

But Ernie was chuckling. "Will you fix me something to eat? And will you let me sleep here tonight?"

"Of course." Rosalia started toward the kitchen.

Ernie was mumbling, "There's a flaw somewhere. There's a flaw in Olaf's plan. If there wasn't, he wouldn't have hired that kind of a crew."

Rosalia felt a stir of panic. "There is a flaw all right, but you will not find it because they will find you first." She returned to him, begged frantically, "Ernie, please! Go away. You will have the whole country to fight, and one man can't do it. They'll catch you and they'll—" She couldn't go on.

Ernie was laughing softly. That surprised Rosalia. He should have been bitter; he should have been afraid. She shrugged and turned away toward the kitchen. Perhaps she loved him more because he had returned. But she was afraid she would not be able to love him for long. No one man could live for long against the odds that Ernie Waymire faced.

Rosalia dropped a steak into a smoking skillet and began to cry, silently so that Ernie would not hear.

IX

DAYS passed slowly for Irene Hunnicutt. For most of her life she had kept house for her father and brothers, no small task in itself. Now, however, she not only kept house at the Wheel for them, but also cared for Matthew.

He was totally helpless. Only his sight and his hearing were unimpaired. She washed him, fed him, shaved him. She read to him from whatever books and newspapers she was able to find.

Often she lied to Olaf, making him believe that Matthew was asleep, saving Matthew the misery of Olaf's gloating. Remorse tortured Irene, remorse for the part she had played in Matthew's downfall and Ernie's outlawry.

She had no hope whatever that things would ever be different. Nor could she change them. Her word would be of no value against that of Olaf and Frank and Dave. She resolved, however, that she would stay here at the Wheel for only as long as Matthew lived. When he was gone, she would leave, would try to find another life for herself somewhere.

One hot morning about a month after moving to the Wheel, Irene found a copy of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* lying on a bench in front of the bunkhouse. Since all of the crew was gone, she decided to borrow it for the day, to read it to Matthew.

When she took it into the house, Matthew was awake. Irene pulled a chair toward the bed, sat down, and smiled at him. Whatever he had done during his life, whoever he had hurt, he was paying for it now.

Irene suddenly realized that she didn't hate Matthew any longer. He had hurt Ernie, had indirectly brought about all that had happened to all of them, yet *he* was paying the highest price.

She asked, "Would you like me to read you this?" She showed him the book so that he could read the title. Matthew blinked his eyes. Irene said, "It's a shame you can't

talk. I never know if you like what I read to you or not. I guess if you don't, you just have to suffer through it, don't you?"

Matthew blinked twice. There was a curious intensity in his glance. His face worked as though he were trying to speak. Irene laid the book aside.

"You're tryin gto tell me something, aren't you?"

Again Matthew blinked. Irene asked, "Are you hungry?" Matthew blinked twice.

Irene, puzzled said, "I wish I could think of some way to figure out what you want."

Matthew's face worked violently. He managed to utter a small croak. It was obvious that he was intensely excited, and angry too. Suddenly he began to blink his eyes, rapidly, ceaselessly. Irene's eyes widened. Matthew stopped blinking. Then he blinked once, waited, blinked again. His look at Irene was intense, pleading. He blinked twice in rapid succession, waited, and did it again.

Irene felt a sudden soaring excitement. She said, "Why, you're trying to talk to me! Yes is one blink, no is two, is that it?"

Matthew blinked once. The relief in his eyes was almost pitiful. Irene got up and went to the door. She wandered through the house, making sure that Olaf and Frank and Dave were gone. When she came back to Matthew's room, she went to the window and peered out. Then she returned to the bedside.

She said, "You can answer questions if I can think of the right ones to ask." She realized that she still held the book in her hand. "Do you want me to read you this book now?"

Matthew blinked twice. Irene asked, "Later?" One blink. Irene put down the book. "Do you want to talk?" Matthew signified, "Yes."

IRENE realized suddenly that although she could now communicate to some degree to Matthew, she still could not know what was in his mind, or know his desires. Only through questions put to him by herself could she communicate with him at all. It would take patience, lots of patience.

Another realization struck her with stunning force. Now, Matthew would be able to talk to the sheriff, if only by this primitive form of communication. With Matthew backing Irene's story it would now be possible to oust Olaf from the Wheel. It would be possible to clear Ernie of the murder charge from which he was fleeing! Her word, backed up by that of Matthew, would be more than sufficient.

She said, "Would you like to talk to the sheriff?"

Matthew blinked once. His eyes showed great relief. Irene asked, "You hate me, don't you? For what I've done?" He blinked twice. His eyes, which at first had been so hating and so hard, were not so now.

Irene felt tears smarting in her own eyes. She asked, "Do you hate Ernie?"

Again Matthew signed, "No."

"Would you want Ernie back here at the Wheel?" Matthew indicated that he did. "But you wouldn't want me here, too?"

Matthew hesitated at the way her question was phrased, although Irene did not know that. Finally he blinked twice. Irene misunderstood. She said, "I guess I can't blame you," turning away. She did not see the violent twitching of his face as he sought to make her understand. She was looking out the window.

She turned back toward the bed. "Trying to get the sheriff out here will be dangerous. Olaf has hired a new crew. They're a hard-looking lot and they all wear guns." She thought for a moment. "I can't go into town. Olaf wouldn't let me. He still doesn't trust me. I can't send a letter, either." Suddenly she thought of Ramon Ortiz. She asked, "Can we trust Ramon?"

For a moment Matthew stared at her, his eyes both thoughtful and doubtful. Finally he blinked once. Irene almost smiled. She said, "You think so but you're not sure, is that it?"

Matthew blinked immediately.

Irene thought of the sour-faced old cook. She asked, "How about the cook? Do you trust him?" Matthew's answer was an unhesitating yes.

Yet his eyes seemed to want to tell her something further. Irene thought about that. She could not remember the cook ever leaving the ranch, at least in the few weeks she

had been at Wheel.

She asked, "Does the cook ever go to town?" Matthew blinked twice.

Irene frowned. If the cook was not in the habit of going to town, a sudden trip might arouse Olaf's suspicion. She looked at Matthew. "Do you think it would be better to send the cook after the sheriff?"

Matthew blinked twice. "You want me to send Ramon then?" Matthew indicated that he did. Irene said, "All right. I'll talk to him the first chance I get. You go to sleep. You look tired."

She went out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her. She was conscious of her shaking hands. She was conscious of an over-powering tension. She began to realize that there was infinite danger in what she had learned today. If Olaf got even an inkling that Matthew could talk, Matthew would be dead in an hour.

She was also aware that Olaf, having tasted the power and wealth the Wheel gave him, would kill without compunction to hold the Wheel. He had used Irene herself, his own daughter, to obtain the Wheel. He would use her, even sacrifice her, to keep it. So there was danger not only to Matthew, but to herself as well.

SHE could see now that if she had been less under Olaf's thumb at the beginning, this could never have happened. It was her own greed that had tripped her up, had made her fall in with Olaf's plans. If she had done what Ernie wanted her to, to begin with, all would have been well.

Desperately she wished she had gone away with him when he first asked her. What would it have mattered if she'd had to live in a one-room, dirt-floored shack? She'd have had Ernie, and she'd have had the future. Now she had nothing, not even her self-respect.

Despair ran through her thoughts. She went out onto the portico and sank into a chair. Heat blazed down into the yard, rising in shimmering waves, distorting the horizon, every object in view. Irene pushed a damp strand of dark hair away from her forehead.

She had lost weight in these last few weeks, but it detracted in no way from her beauty. There was a haunting, hollow look to her cheeks. A pulse beat visibly in her throat.

The Wheel, she realized, no longer meant anything to her. What was it, when all was said and done? A ranch house, and a plain ranch house at that. Land—lots of land—stretching toward the horizon as far as the eye could see, and even beyond that. Cattle. Thousands of cattle.

It was something else to Irene, and it would always be that. It was a man's life sacrificed on the altar of greed. It was another's man's health, also sacrificed. It was Ernie, gone from her forever. It was her own happiness, as remote from her now as Ernie was.

Yet in righting this wrong that had been done, even if it should cost her her life, a measure of self-respect and happiness might be regained. She thought about that for awhile, and gradually her composure returned. Gradually, her despair lessened.

She went through the house to the kitchen. Seran, the cook, was kneading bread dough on the table. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows. He frowned at her irritably.

Irene said, "You hate me, and I can't blame you. But there is a way out of this. Matthew can speak."

Seran's voice was harsh. "You're lying. He's paralyzed."

Irene said, "But he can blink his eyes. Once is yes, twice no."

Seran took his hands out of the dough and began to wipe them on his apron.

Irene said, "Go in to him. See if what I say isn't so."

He lokoed at her suspiciously. "Why you telling me this?"

"Because I need your help. Come into his room with me, and I'll tell you why in front of him. You can ask him if what I say is true."

Seran followed her through the house to Matthew's room. Matthew was still awake.

Irene said, "I told Seran that you could speak. Tell him if it is true." Matthew blinked once.

Irene felt a strange, weird excitement.

She said, "I need his help. I can't go to the bunkhouse to see Ramon. It is too dangerous to you for me to risk getting Olaf suspicious. He'd kill you in a minute if he thought you could talk."

Matthew blinked. Irene turned to the cook. She said, "We want to send Ramon to Cedrino for the sheriff. We want to get the sheriff out here to talk to Matthew. But he must come when Olaf is away. He must not be seen here. Now ask Matthew if what I have said is the truth."

Seran's voice asked harshly, "Is it, Boss?"

Matthew blinked once. Still Seran seemed suspicious. He grumbled, "How do I know he don't mean no?"

"Ask him some of your own questions."

"I will." The cook turned to the man on the bed. "How long I been working for you, Boss? Five years?"

MATTHEW blinked twice. "Ten?" asked Seran. Again Matthew signed, "No." Seran asked, "Twenty-three?" Matthew considered that for a moment, finally blinking once in assent. Seran whistled. "Lordy! This is plumb uncanny."

Irene said sharply, "You are to tell no one about it, do you understand? Not even Ramon."

"Sure, ma'am. Sure." He turned to Matthew, asking doubtfully, "You reckon this here woman is all right?" Matthew signed, "Yes." Seran turned away. "I guess that's good enough for me."

Irene heard a shout in the yard, the pound of hooves. She ran to the window. Olaf, tall and burly in the saddle, rode into the yard at the head of three of his gunslingers. Frank rode beside him, gun-hung, scowling as was his habit.

Irene turned from the window. She said. "Get back to the kitchen. Try to see Ramon tonight."

The cook shuffled out. Irene smiled at Matthew. "It will be all right. It will be all right, won't it?" It was as though she sought assurance, support from the helpless old man on the bed. He blinked at her once, and she thought if he could smile, he would be smiling now.

She went outside and watched Olaf and Frank unsaddle. The crew slouched into the bunkhouse and Olaf and Frank came toward the house. Olaf seemed about to speak to her, but just then another rider came pounding into the yard. It was another of the tough crew, one named Lew Murray. He rode directly to the house.

He said, "Boss, what'd you say Ernie Waymire looked like?"

Olaf described Ernie quickly. Murray grunted, "Then I seen him. I seen him not an hour ago. He was stopped at Apache Springs watering his horse."

Irene looked at Olaf. His face grew red, darkened until it was a deep brick color. He roared, "Red! Sam! Miguel! Saddle up! We're going hunting! By God, we're going hunting!"

The crew tumbled out of the bunkhouse. Olaf and Lew and Frank ran toward the corral. In less than three minutes all six of them thundered out of the yard, heading toward Apache Springs.

And Irene was helpless, totally helpless. Or was she? Olaf and Frank would be gone all night if necessary, chasing Ernie. There could be no better time to go to Cedrino after the sheriff than now! And since Ramon was not here, Irene would go herself.

She ran into the house, into Matthew's room. She cried, "One of the crew has seen Ernie! They've all gone after him. Ramon isn't in yet, so I'm going after the sheriff."

Without waiting to see what Matthew's reaction would be, she fled from the room. She did not even bother to change her clothes. She ran across the yard, snatched her side saddle from the corral fence. Roping a horse expertly from the bunch she flung saddle onto him and cinched it down. Then she was spurring wildly in the direction of Cedrino.

And as she rode, she began to pray. Not for herself, but for Ernie. With six determined men chasing him, Ernie was the one who needed her prayers.

X

NIGHT had come when Irene Hunnicutt rode her exhausted horse down the narrow, rutted street of Cedrino. The moon was rising from the horizon, a yellow, enlarged ball

that put a warm light upon the town. She could hear a soft Mexican voice singing somewhere, and the sound of a guitar.

She passed Rosalia Ortiz' restaurant, and glanced in the window. Her brother Dave was at one of the tables, talking to Rosalia. She hurried past, hoping he would not glance out into the street.

At the sheriff's office she dismounted stiffly. She pushed open the door, breathing a sigh of relief. Tall, gaunt old Nate Gunlock sat at his desk with his feet up. He was smoking a long black cigar with every evidence of enjoyment. Irene guessed that he had just come from the restaurant.

He got to his feet hastily when he saw her. "Miss Hunnicutt—er—Mrs. Waymire!" There was surprise in his tone. "What are you doing in town? I thought—"

Irene had no time to find out what he thought. It didn't matter anyway. She said urgently, "I haven't much time, so listen to me carefully. Ernie didn't kill Al. My brother Frank did that."

The sheriff said grimly, "I've suspected that Ernie didn't have anything to do with it. That's why I haven't been pressing the hunt for him too hard. Can you prove it?"

"Yes. I was there. Also, I can communicate with Matthew. He blinks his eyes to give yes and no answers. I want you to ride out to the Wheel with me tonight and talk to him. I want you to clear Ernie."

Gunlock had come to his feet. "Well, I guess so!"

"It's dangerous for you, and for me as well. I know Olaf. He's had a taste of owning the Wheel and he won't give it up."

"Let me worry about Olaf." There was something grim in the sheriff's tone.

Irene let what she had so determinedly kept pushed back in her thoughts all the way to town come out now. She said, "Ernie's back. Olaf knows it. He and Frank and four of those gunslingers Dave hired are hunting him." She put her face down into her hands, shaking, but not crying. She was holding onto herself with grim desperation. If she let go now—

Gunlock gripped her shoulders. "Don't worry—don't worry. It won't help Ernie a bit. Ernie's been running over a month. And he's smart. He's learned a lot of the tricks of staying away from pursuit by now." He started for the door. "Wait here a minute. I want Kirby along on this ride. I want another witness, in case——" He was gone out the door.

Irene sat down and clenched her hands together. Her thoughts kept screaming, Hurry! Hurry!

It seemed an eternity before Gunlock and Kirby came back. Gunlock came over and touched her shoulders. He said, "We've got a few minutes to wait. I sent to the stable after our horses, and for a fresh one for you." He went back to his desk and sat down.

Oliver Kirby, elegant and sombre-faced, lounged against the wall.

Gunlock asked, "Will you tell me the whole story now? It will save time after we get to the Wheel."

"All right."

Irene began at the beginning, with Olaf's corrosive hatred of Matthew. She outlined the trap Olaf had set for Ernie, by using her as bait. She did not spare herself in the recital. But when she came to the part where she had fallen in love with Ernie, she began to cry.

A small Mexican boy stuck his head in the door. "Señor, the horses. I bring them."

Gunlock stood up. He tossed the boy a coin.

Outside, he helped Irene to her saddle, then mounted himself. Kirby mounted and the three went out of town at a fast trot.

OUT on the road, Gunlock lifted his horse to a slow, rocking lope. Irene was tired. As they rode, she finished her story, told about the shooting, about Olaf slugging Ernie, about the later developments after they had discovered that Matthew was alive.

After that she was silent. Each moment was an eternity, and the hours dragged endlessly. But at last they raised the lights of the Wheel ranch house ahead.

Irene and Kirby waited outside the fringe of darkness, while Gunlock went forward afoot to scout the place. Only one of the crew was present besides Ramon Ortiz, and both of them were in the bunkhouse. Gun-

lock came back. Silently the three rode in. They tied their horses behind the house.

While Irene waited, Gunlock and Kirby, guns drawn, went into the bunkhouse. There was a sharp flurry of action. Then Gunlock and Kirby came out. Ramon Ortiz followed, dragging the unconscious gunman. They carried him to the door of the root cellar, tied his hands and feet, and took him down the stairs into the cellar.

Irene led the three of them into the house. She was calculating the odds now, and found them not so unfavorable as before. There was Gunlock, there was Kirby. Ramon and the cook could be trusted. And there was herself. Five in all.

Against them would be the six who were hunting Ernie, when and if they returned. Gunmen all of them. Dave was undoubtedly still in town. Ernie was—

Irene shuddered. Her lips moved in silent prayer.

Ramon went into the kitchen after Seran, the cook. Irene led Gunlock and Kirby to Matthew's bedroom. He was asleep. She shook him gently. He opened his eyes. He looked at Gunlock and Kirby.

Irene said, "I've told the whole story to Mr. Gunlock. I'll tell them again, now, and they want you to blink your eyes once to indicate that what I'm saying is the truth."

Gunlock looked at Matthew. "Do you understand, Matt?" Matthew blinked.

In Irene was a feeling of desperation. In spirit, she was with Ernie, fleeing across the desert, with six determined and ruthless men at his heels. If they caught him—

Resolutely she began to talk. At intervals she would stop, and Gunlock or Kirby would ask Matthew, "Is that the way it was, Matt?" Matthew would blink to indicate that what she said was true.

Ramon and the cook watched from the door. There was a gap in the story. None of them knew how Matthew and Al Waymire had come to be at the rendezvous that fateful Saturday night. That was a secret locked inside of Matthew. Only he, or the dead Al, could tell that, and neither could talk.

At last it was finished. Then the waiting began.

Midnight passed. Seran went to the kitchen and shortly returned with a big pot of black coffee. After awhile, Matthew dropped off to sleep. They filed out of his room to the big living room and sat around silently, waiting.

Once, Irene screamed at the sheriff, "Do something! Do something! Ernie's being hunted. They'll kill him! You've got to stop it!" She began to sob brokenly.

Gunlock came over and patted her shoulder awkwardly. "There ain't nothing we can do, honey. We ain't got a chance of finding that bunch out on the desert tonight. If we did find 'em out there, we couldn't do anything. We've got to wait for them here and try and surprise them. It's the only chance we got."

They blew out the lamps and waited in darkness. Gunlock asked, "Irene, do you know why old Matt and your father hated each other?"

She shook her head. She realized at once that Gunlock could not see her, and she said, "No. I guess nobody knows except the two of them."

KIRBY cleared his throat. "Maybe Matt would want it known. I don't think there's any point in secrecy now."

Gunlock whistled. "Do you know?"

"Yes." Kirby's chair creaked and he cleared his throat. "I was practicing law in a little Kansas town when I first knew Matt and Olaf. Matt wasn't much different than he is now. He was hard as nails. A religious man—too much so. He thought all forms of pleasure were the works of the devil. His wife was a good woman, but she was different than Matt."

Irene interrupted, "Was she Ernie's mother?"

"Yes. She shriveled, living with Matt. She liked people, dancing, music. She liked everything." His tone was soft, reminiscent. Irene had the thought, Why, Mr. Kirby loved her!

Kirby went on, "She bore him two sons, Al and Ernie. As soon as Al was weaned, she ran away with Olaf Hunnicutt."

Suddenly, Irene could see it. The reason for Matt's undying hatred of Olaf. But she

had not heard it all. She had not yet learned why Olaf hated Matt.

Kirby coughed. His voice was lower pitched, more intense. He said, "Matt followed, of course. He left the two babies with a neighbor woman and followed. He caught up with them at Abilene. They were registered at a hotel as man and wife."

Gunlock's voice was gruff. "Were you there?"

"I got there a little too late. You see, I loved Matt's wife, too, although she didn't know it. She would never have known it from me. But I was afraid for her. I knew Matt. I knew his violent temper."

He cleared his throat. He waited for a long time. The silence grew uncomfortable. Finally Gunlock said, "What happened?"

Kirby's voice was different, strained. He said, "Matt found out where they were. He went storming into the hotel room after them. He had a gun. He told Olaf he was going to kill him. He laughed. He said there wasn't a jury in the country would convict him for it. I guess he was about to do it—"

Kirby stopped again. Irene wished she could see his face. She wondered if it was as tortured as his voice.

Finally Kirby said hoarsely, "Mary tried to stop Matt. She grappled with him."

Gunlock said, "And he shot her?"

"No. But it was just as bad. He struck her. He was blind with rage. He struck her in the face with his fist to knock her out of the way. She hit her head against a corner of the bed as she fell." His voice dropped to a whisper. "It killed her."

He went on, his voice stronger, showing anger now. "I burst into the room just as Matt struck her. I clubbed him with my gun-barrel. But it was too late. She was dead."

Now everything was plain to Irene. It was a terrible story, but it explained a lot of things.

But Kirby wasn't through. He said, his voice singularly lifeless, "Olaf left town before Matthew came to. He came to Cedrino and settled. He married a local woman—your mother, Irene. But Matthew kept hunting him."

Gunlock asked, "Matt was cleared by the law, then?"

"Yes. They called it accidental death. It was that all right. Matt was a crazy man when he realized what he'd done. But he kept hunting Olaf. And at last he found him."

Gunlock said, "Didn't he try to kill him then?"

"No. A couple of years had passed. He'd cooled off. Maybe he'd begun to see that he'd been wrong, too. Or maybe he felt a sense of responsibility to his two sons. He didn't try to kill Olaf, but he couldn't stop hating him."

Kirby lapsed into silence. After a long while, he said, "Olaf didn't stop hating Matt, either. Olaf really loved Mary, just as I did. Now Olaf's had his revenge."

Irene could not help thinking, But you haven't.

APPARENTLY, Gunlock had just thought of the same thing. He said, "Matt killed her, and both you and Olaf loved her. Didn't you hate Matt for killing her?"

Kirby got out of his chair and strode to the window. He stared out at the moonlit yard. At last he said, "Yes. I hated him." He turned around, facing Gunlock. The moon, shining on one side of his face, showed an almost fanatical intensty there. But his voice was calm, almost gentle. "Time softens everything. A man can't live his life out hating. I tried to think that perhaps Mary had forgiven Matt. I tried to tell myself that Matt was suffering, that he was paying for what he'd done."

A shout lifted out on the desert, distant and unreal. Gunlock sprang to his feet. "Here they come!"

Swiftly, with no confusion at all, Seran and Ramon took positions at two of the windows, resting their rifle-barrels on the sills. Gunlock went to the front door, his Colt cocked in his hand. Irene, with Kirby forgotten now, went and stood beside him.

Olaf pounded into the yard, with Frank just behind him. Irene's lips moved with a prayer for Ernie. She heard Frank's steady cursing.

Olaf shouted, "Shut up, damn you! We'll catch him. We'll go out first thing in the morning and we'll run him down if it takes a month!"

All of the tension left Irene with painful abrupt ess. She could feel warm tears of relief flooding her eyes, running across her cheeks.

She breathed, "Ernie's safe! Ernie's safe! Thank God!"

Gunlock stepped out onto the porch. He called, "Frank! I want you for the murder of Al Waymire."

There was a flurry of confusion in the yard. Olaf shouted, "What the hell?" He spurred across the yard and brought his horse to a plunging halt before the sheriff. "Damn you, Gunlock, get out of here!"

Gunlock said, "Matthew talked. He said Frank killed Al. He told the whole story, Olaf."

Irene stood in the doorway, shivering with terror. At that moment she admired the sheriff tremendously. But he didn't know Olaf as she did. Olaf wouldn't give up. Olaf yanked his gun clear.

Gunlock's revolver spouted orange flame, and the horse, shot through the shoulders, sprang forward and pitched to his knees, throwing Olaf clear. From across the yard, flame laced from the barrels of Frank's two guns.

Frank yelled, "Let 'em have it, boys! This is what you were hired for!"

Gunlock came across the portico, running. He burst through the door and slammed it behind him. He yelled, "Get down, girl! Stay away from the windows and doors. The damned fools are going to fight!"

Irene remembered that she hadn't seen Kirby since they had first heard that shout out on the desert. She looked around the room. It was dark, lighted only by the moon glow filtering in through the open windows. But Kirby was not in the room.

She said, panic making her voice high, "Sheriff, where is Mr. Kirby?"

At that instant, the shoot boomed out. Inside the house it was, reverberating and echoing. In Matthew's room. Irene ran toward the hallway that led to Matthew's bedroom. She almost ran into Kirby. He had a gun in his hand. Irene smelled the acrid smoke rising from its muzzle.

Kirby said carefully, "I'm your man, Sheriff. I just killed Matt."

XI

COMPLETE knowledge of the desert surrounding the Wheel ranch house had enabled Ernie to stay away from Olaf and Frank and their riders. Once they rode past his hiding place in a dry arroyo so close that he could hear the breathing of their horses.

As soon as they had passed out of earshot that time, he had headed for Wheel headquarters. He approached through the horse pasture. A hundred yards from the corral, he tied his horse to the fence, and approached on foot. He had no idea of what he hoped to accomplish by this, but he knew that whatever he did accomplish could not be done riding around on the desert.

At the Wheel was the key to clearing himself with the law—Irene. If he could talk to her, he might be able to find out what had actually happened the night Al was killed. Knowing precisely what had happened, perhaps he could then map some course of action.

He had no sooner reached the shadow of the corral, than Olaf and the others rode in.

Frank's steady cursing stirred the anger in Ernie. He heard Gunlock's call from the house. He saw the flurry of shots. And he heard the shot inside the house.

Gunlock's words had the same effect on Ernie as a deep draught of fiery liquor would would have had. He felt the racing of his blood, a quickening of his breathing. He withdrew his Colt from holster.

Olaf was running across the yard. The two guns in Frank's hands were still spitting at the house. Frank emptied his guns, then ducked into the shadow of the bunkhouse to reload.

Frank, then, had killed Al. Frank was the one Ernie wanted first. Then Olaf. A figure broke away from the house, a figure almost white in the dim moonlight. Ernie could see that the man's hat was white. Oliver Kirby. What the hell was he doing out here?

Kirby headed around the house, but one of Olaf's gun crew, hiding there, threw a shot at him. He veered away, hesitated. Someone else, over behind the bunkhouse took another shot at him. Neither scored.

Kirby broke into a run, this time heading directly across the yard toward the corral. He moved like a wraith through the dappled pattern which the cottonwoods cast.

Ernie waited. Someone else threw a hasty shot at Kirby, missed. The bullet cut chips of bark out of a corral pole an inch above Ernie's head. He ducked instinctively, swore instinctively.

A rifle boomed from the house, targeting on the flash of that last pistol shot. A man howled, and began to curse violently. Kirby would have run right past Ernie, but Ernie stuck out a foot and tripped him. He sat down on Kirby, saying:

"Where the hell you going? You figuring on walking clear to town?" He wanted to talk to Kirby. He wanted to know what was going on. He said, "How'd Gunlock know Frank Hunnicutt killed Al?"

The fright seemed to go out of the lawyer upon learning that this was Ernie, and not a Hunnicutt man. He said, turning his head, "Irene came into town tonight and told him. Gunlock and I came out and talked to Matthew."

"I thought he's paralyzed."

"He was. But he could blink his eyes. Irene worked it out so he could blink once for yes, twice for no."

"Then I'm in a clear. I'm free." Ernie failed to notice Kirby's use of the past tense. Kirby twisted under him. "Can I go now?"

"I guess you can. But it's a hell of a long walk to town."

KIRBY got up and dusted himself off with his hands. He picked up his hat and flapped it against a knee.

Ernie asked, "Who's in the house?"

"Gunlock and Irene, Seran and Ramon. Dave's in town; you can count him out of this. He has no stomach for fighting this fight. He never had."

"And Matthew's there too?"

Kirby nodded. Ernie said, "All right. Go on." This wasn't Kirby's fight, and besides that, Kirby wasn't what you'd call a fighting man. Ernie didn't feel he had the right to ask him to stay. As an afterthought, he said, "My horse is tied a hundred yards or so down the pasture fence. Use him if you want."

He was thinking of the two hunded dollars Kirby had given him, thinking of the way Kirby had talked Gunlock into giving him a job. This wasn't much repayment, but it was all he could manage now.

Kirby scuttled away. As soon as he was a dozen yards from Ernie, he began to run. Ernie turned his attention back to the house. There was desultory rifle-fire from the two front windows.

During his weeks of running, Ernie had figured out that it must have been Al who had trailed him to his meeting place with Irene. It must have been Al who had brought Matthew out that night. The knowledge that Al had betrayed him did not increase his love for Al. But Al was dead. You couldn't hate the dead for what they'd done. Maybe Al had a reason for what he did.

Ernie was intensely aware that if his presence was discovered by Olaf or Frank, that he wouldn't last long. His horse was gone. If Olaf and Frank, and their gun crew concentrated on Ernie instead of on the house, he wouldn't have a chance. It followed then, that what fighting he did would have to be done carefully.

He slid along in the shadow of the corral. Running, he crossed a spot of open ground in full moonlight. A man behind the root cellar moved aside slightly to give him room in the shadow. Ernie realized immediately that the man had mistaken him for one of the crew. He had his gun in his hand. He brought its barrel down in a slashing arc against the man's head, and caught him as he fell.

The man wore a battered, black felt hat, with the brim pulled down in front. Ernie eased him to the ground and traded hats with him. He took the man's gun out of its holster and tossed it up onto the roof of the cellar. The man's rifle followed.

The barn was next. Pulling the black hat down low on his face, Ernie ran across to it. He was grinning a little, amused that he was

drawing no fire. The hat had done the trick.

A man stood at the corner of the barn, peering at the house. As Ernie approached, he brought his gun up and fired. Ernie could hear the solid sound the bullet made biting into the 'dobe bricks of the house. Ernie slugged him from behind. The man pitched forward into the bright moonlight and lay still. Ernie backed away from this corner and walked clear around the barn. Coming out on the other side, he ran across to the shelter of the bunkhouse.

There was no mistaking the man here. Frank Hunnicutt. Slight and dark. Sharp-faced. Two holsters, both tied down, and a gun in each hand. This had to be different.

Ernie stood and looked at him for a moment. He was thinking of Al, of all the good times they'd had as kids. He was thinking of the way Al and he had sort of stood together against old Matthew. Ernie felt as cold as ice. He'd never done this before, but there was only one way to do it.

He called softly, "Frank! It's Ernie. Turn around and see if you can give me what you gave Al."

Frank froze for the briefest instant. Then it seemed as though every muscle and nerve in his body went tight. He whirled.

ERNIE waited until he came full around. Why, he couldn't have said. Frank wouldn't have given him the same chance. Frank's left-hand gun went off, though it was not even pointing at Ernie. The right-hand gun shot off a blue reflection of moonlight. Ernie's finger tightened down on the trigger. A blow struck his shoulder and drove him back. He staggered, recovered his balance and fired again.

He could have saved that one. Frank was crumpling to the ground, limp, dead as he fell.

Ernie heard Olaf's bellow, "Frank! What the hell?"

He heard running feet. His shoulder felt numb. He backed away. Automatically transferring his gun to his left hand, he whirled and ran.

He went around the corner of the bunkhouse, running full tilt into another man, another of the crew. Ernie stuck his gun in the man's belly. He said harshly, "Horses in the corral. I'd pull out if I was you. Frank's dead, and two of the crew are out cold. Take a tip, friend, and run."

He let the man go by and gave him a little push. He watched to be sure the man would run. The man made a straight line for the corral.

Ernie went on around the bunkhouse, to the wall that faced the house. He yelled, "Gunlock! Come on out! All that's left is Olaf and one man."

He saw Gunlock coming at a crouching run. Behind him ran Ramon, and behind Ramon, slower, was the cook.

Out at the corral, a man leaped astride a horse, bareback, and spurred away. Up at the house, Irene ran out into the moonlight. Ernie stared at her for a moment with mixed feelings. Part of the blame for all that had happened belonged to Irene. Yet in the end she had done what was right. She had gone to Gunlock with her story, Kirby had told him.

Gunlock passed him, yelling, "Olaf! Don't be a damned fool, man! I don't want you for anything. Ride out if you want."

Olaf's other hired gunman came limping out of the bunkhouse, his hands upraised. Gunlock and Ramon went out of sight behind the bunkhouse. The cook followed, herding the gunman before him. Ernie could hear the sheriff talking, and it could only have been to Olaf that he talked.

Ernie felt his body relax. If Olaf had intended to put up a fight, he'd have done it before now. In a way, it was a relief to Ernie that he didn't. He supposed he should hate Olaf, should want his dead, but somehow, the feeling that there had been enough killing tonight was paramount in him. Perhaps that was the reaction from killing Frank.

He holstered his gun and walked toward the house. Irene stared at him, unbelieving. Her face was dead white, but beautiful in the moonlight.

She asked softly, scared still, "Ernie? Is that really you?"

"Yes. It's me." It occurred to him that this was his wife, that this was the wife he had never claimed.

He stared down at her. Her voice was

the merest whisper, "Ernie, I'm sorry."

Ernie said, steeling himself against the light fragrance of her, "I killed Frank."

"And Olaf?"

"He's all right. The sheriff is over there talking to him now. I think the sheriff wants to let him go."

"What about you?"

"I'm willing. And as for Dave, I figured all along his heart wasn't in the deal."

He didn't know where to begin this. He didn't even know if he wanted to begin it again. For weeks he had spent his waking hours hating Irene. But standing close to her, it was hard to keep hate alive.

IT WAS she who turned away. She walked back to the house, and Ernie followed. She struck a match and lighted a lamp. For a moment she stood looking at Ernie, her eyes altogether unreadable.

At last she said, "You're thinner. You're pale."

He felt pain replacing the numbness in his shoulder. All of a sudden Irene saw the blood that stained his shirt.

"You're hurt, too. Frank?"

He nodded and sat down. Gunlock and the cook came in. Gunlock said, "Olaf's leaving. He's taking Frank's body with him. Ramon's helping him get saddled up." Gunlock looked down at Ernie. "Is that all right with you, or do you want to prefer charges?"

Ernie said, "Let him go." Irene left the room abruptly with a murmured comment about water and bandages. Gunlock waited until she was out of the room. Then he asked, "What about her?"

Ernie didn't answer.

Gunlock said, "If it hadn't been for her, things would've turned out mighty different tonight. You could do a lot worse, boy. Everybody makes mistakes."

Ernie asked, "Where's Matthew?"

"Dead. Kirby killed him. Didn't you know?"

"How the hell could I know?" Ernie blinked. "Kirby?"

Gunlock explained briefly of the lawyer's hatred for Matthew.

"And I let Kirby borrow my horse," Ernie said with mild regret, then dismissed it from mind.

He wished he could get his thoughts about Irene straightened out. He wanted her, yet he could not seem to forget that a lot of this had been her fault, that she had been in it with Olaf, cold, calculating, scheming.

She came back into the room and knelt beside him. She tore his shirt away from his wound. She began to bathe it with a cloth and cold water.

Matthew was dead. It had been hard to believe when Olaf had told him that a month ago. It was harder to believe now. It was hard for Ernie to realize that the iron control that had always governed his life was suddenly gone.

Pain dizzied him as Irene sponged his shoulder. He was thinking of both Olaf and Matthew, comparing them. And suddenly he had the answer. Irene had been no more to blame for this than Ernie himself. Both of them had lived their lives under the iron rule of their fathers. And both of them had done only what they had to do.

He thought about that all the time Irene was bandaging his arm. She stood up, wiping her hands. She said in a still voice, "I'll go pack my things."

Ernie reached up and caught her hand. He pulled her toward him, and used the pull to come out of the chair to his feet. He drew her close against him.

"Do you want to go?"

She hesitated, seeming about to nod. Then she met his eyes. She shook her head, wordless. Ernie smiled, sure and glad, and lowered his lips to hers.

Featured in Our Next Issue

QUICKSAND by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

AND TWO OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WESTERN NOVELS

QUESTIONS HUNTING

Question: What, in your estimation, is fitting coverage for the feet when hunting in snowy, winter conditions?—Adolph Harringer, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Answer: There are as many answers to that question as there are types of snowy, winter weather. Thirty below and a north wind calls for different footwear than zero, or above freezing, snowy slop. For all around winter hunting wear it is hard to beat a pair of thin, nylon socks, with a pair of heavy wool socks on top, covered with a rubber bottomed, leather

topped shoe. Many hunters, however, can't bear rubber on their feet and for these leather seems the best bet, but always with more than one pair of socks, with the boots large enough so that the feet aren't cramped. Try to tell this to your wife or sweetheart hunting companion, however, and you may be surprised.

Question: Did the various diseases now affecting game of the western plains, also bother them in the early days?—Herb Siedel, Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Answer: A lot of these sicknesses didn't affect early day game. I can't recall noting much disease among prairie jack rabbits until after the nesters came, and the heavy concentration of livestock. Cottontail rabbits, on the other hand, seemed to increase and die off in cycles, as is attested by both my experience and by Indian legend. Yet I never could believe that this was due to disease among these succulent bunnies. Rather I thought that weather conditions caused the decimation of these rabbits.

An unseasonable snow melt, producing ice that locked the cottontails off from food, caused their demise in numbers. At times, in the badlands along the Montana-Dakota line, one could bag a couple gunny sacks of cottontails in a day's hunt, whereas in the same area, n another year, none could be found. Yet I cannot recall ever dressing out a diseased cottontail, and I've eaten many. It seemed to me that the numbers stayed fairly constant outside the badlands, in the prairie dog village areas, where icing conditions and snow depth would not mean so much to existence. Yet, the Indians claimed that every seven years the cottontails disappeared.

Surely, we didn't have hoof and mouth disease among our deer in pioneer days.

Question: Again and again I have argued with folks that the western cougar would not attack humans. Yet the same old superstition keeps cropping up among my acquaintances. What do you say?—Bernie Bloom, New York City.

Answer: The general opinion that cougars, or the so-called western mountain lion will attack humans, stems from the days when they most certainly would. In the early days, before the big cats gained respect for man and his smoke pole, they often did attack humans. In more modern times they have attacked children, apparently with intent. But in all cases that I

have known of, where they attacked adults, it has seemed to be a case of mistaken identity. And herein lies a warning for the careless hunter, camper and hiker in cougar country. Don't place yourself in a position to seem to be the cougar's legitimate prey. It ain't nice to wake up being fondled by seven feet of claws and fangs.

Making one's bed underneath overhanging shrubbery, as a doe deer would bed down, with little or no sign of human habitation about, can be dangerous, particularly if for various reasons you arrange yourself to look like a deer. Riding a horse or walking along a well traveled deer trail after dark, silently, is also a fair way to go about getting clawed. You may, and many have, done such things for years without being jumped. But venison and horseflesh are favored foods of the big cats, and they have a poor sense of smell, unlike the canine tribe. After the cougar pounces it is too late to tell him who you are and to what tribe you belong.

& FISHING ANSWERS

Question: I intend to go out to Wyoming to hunt antelope. I am told that my .35 Remington is a poor rifle for the work. I have found this gun very good on deer in the past, and feel that it should be satisfactory on antelope. If it isn't, can you tell me why, and recommend a better calibre?—Hugh Scott, Duluth, Mich.

Answer: I don't want to discourage you in your meat-in-the-pot .35 Remington. It is one of the best brush rifles for deer, in my opinion, yet it is far from an ideal antelope rifle. It may cost you your game on this Wyoming trip. Antelope are shot more often at 300 and 400 yards than at 100 and 200, as is the case with deer, except perhaps the western mule. The normal sighting in of the .35 Remington is done to land the slug on the target at 150 yards. At 200 yards it would hit around 5 inches low. This would be all right at this, the normal deer range. At 300 yards the .35 Remington slug would hit around 29 inches below the line of sight. At four hundred, the good Lord help you. The above figures would come about while using the 200 grain slug.

On the other hand, if you were shooting what your friends recommend for this trip,

either the .300 Savage or the 30-06, using a 150 grain slug in the former, a 180 grain in the latter, sighting in at 200 yards, would give you weapons with only a little over 8 inches mid-range trajectory at three hundred yards. Best of all, in my opinion, would be the .270, using the 130 grain slug, offering mid-range trajectory of less than six inches at three hundred yards.

Question: What type of game, found in the United States, would you least care to face in a determined charge?—Byron Selby, Macon, Ga.

Answer: Without the slightest hesitation, my friend, I reply the domestic boar hog, gone thoroughly wild. There are reasons for this, and before I write them, you'll pardon me if I look over my shoulder. Brrr! When one of those low slung brutes, perhaps weighing four hundred pounds, comes larruping through the underbrush, perhaps through a brush tunnel where you can't even see him without getting down on your face, it's Katy bar the door. You'll know where he is though, for he can grunt louder, grit his teeth fiercer, dodge faster, and is harder to hit when under way than any other living animal of dangerous size. Maybe he isn't coming at you with intent to commit mayhem. What difference does it make? Whether he tusks you in passing or simply runs over you with those razor sharp hoofs, you are in for a complete shuffling, believe me.

I once met one of these characters while crawling through a deer tunnel above Redding, California, while deer hunting, face to snout. I'd rather meet two grizzlies, and whether the boar was charging, or just wanting to get out of there in a hurry, in my general direction. And that is the way they always want to go. If you've ever tried to head one of your tame, domestic hogs, you'll get what I mean.

Question: I intend to angle for winter run rainbow trout in streams tributary to the Great Lakes next winter. What is the ideal outfit for these fish, which run quite large?—Ralph Hake, Detroit, Mich.

Answer: I'd strongly recommend a seven and a half foot, glass rod, with a double handed butt, and a tip hardly heavier than that of a five ounce fly rod. On this mount a modern, anti-enertia bass reel, such as the Langeley or Wondereel, and fill the spool with a hundred yards of ten pound, hard braided nylon line. The sinkers should be attached to the head of the leader.

With this hook-up, the short leader is neces-

sary to keep the lure close to the bottom. You'll find that you can cast extremely far and accurately with this outfit.

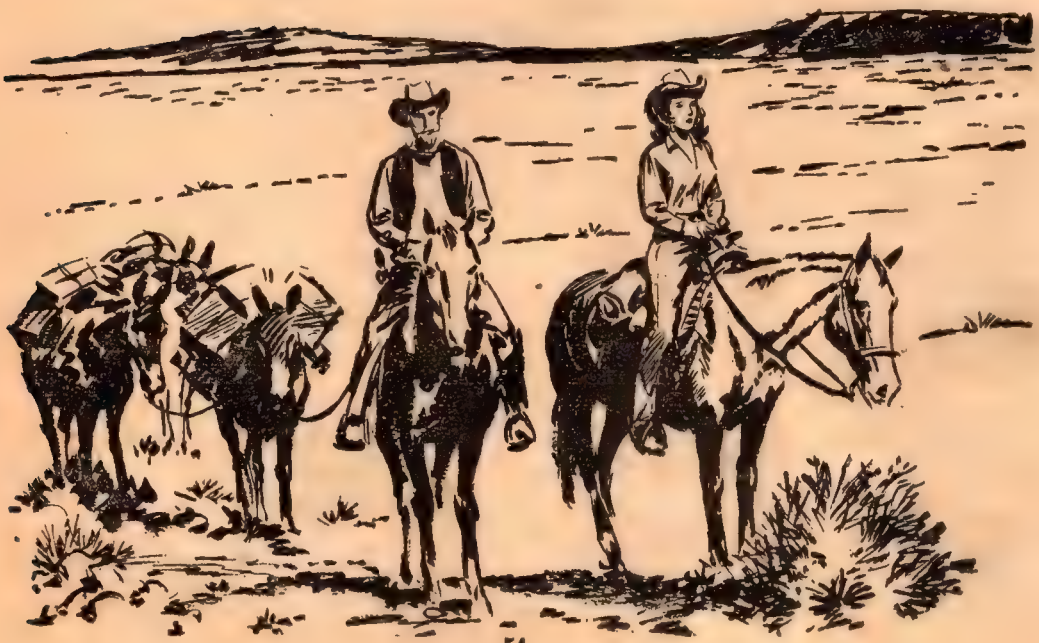
Francis H. Ames

THE WHITE

I

ONE instant Captain Kent Finlay had been riding at the head of a tight column, point pushed warily out ahead in the shadow-painted canyon deep in Apache territory, men swinging behind him with practiced alertness, leather creaking and hooves thudding in dust. A silent, tough body of troopers on route march back to the fort from a week's reconnaissance.

The next instant the tight column was gone. The scream of a frightened horse was echoed by the panic of the other column horses, neighing and plunging. The sergeant's furious bellowing followed an awkward rookie who bounced on a frantic mount straight for the canyon's side wall as the hidden rattlesnake that had struck at the horse's fetlock and missed died under a nearby cavalryman's shot.

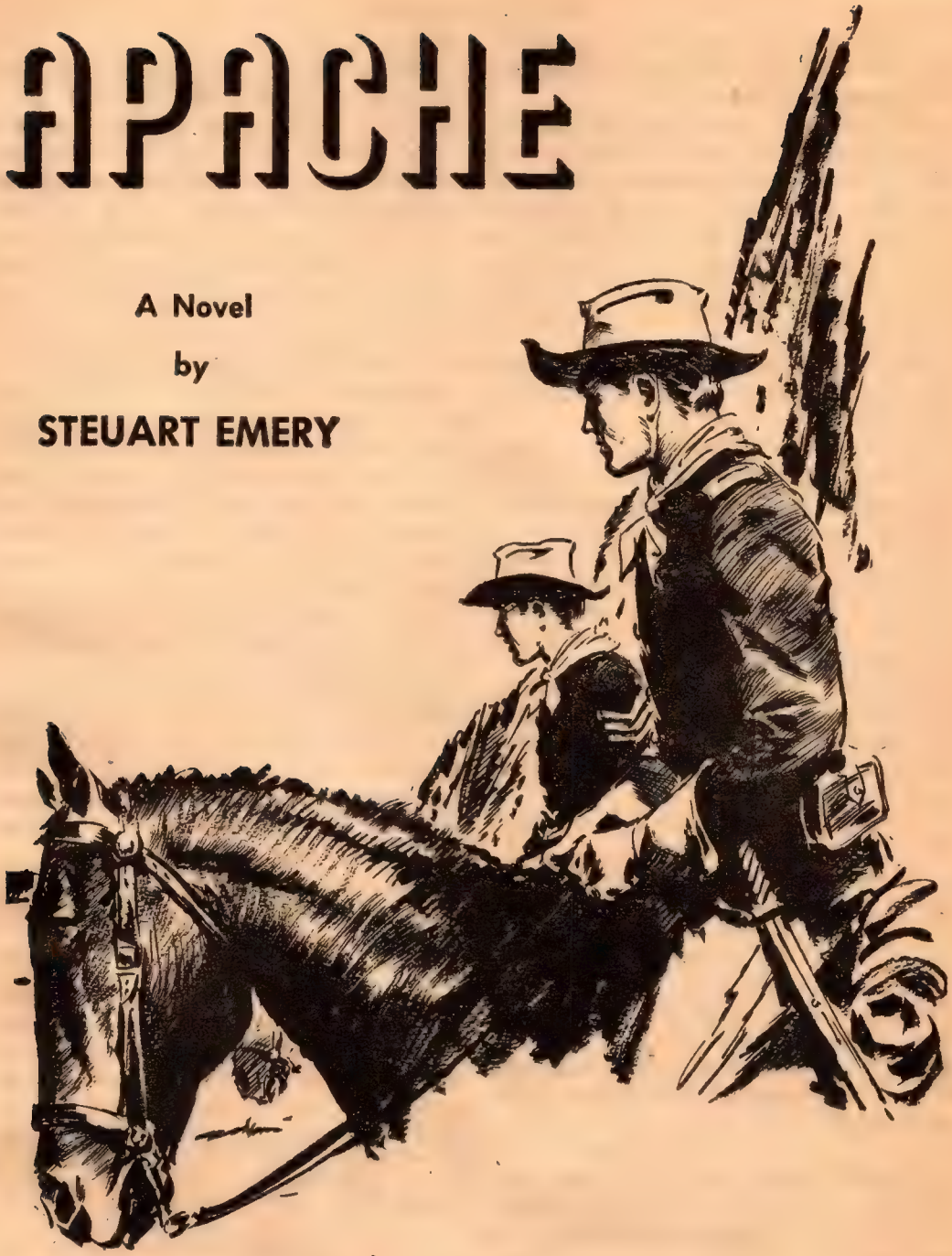


APACHE

A Novel

by

STEUART EMERY



The Apache chief was no Indian, but Captain Finlay well knew he wouldn't hesitate to torture his beautiful brunette captive

"Haul that jughead down, O'Brien!" roared the non-com. "You wanta knock your brains out against the rocks?"

The runaway veered suddenly and the rookie flung himself forward on his mount's neck. Where the solid limestone had loomed a swath of chaparral appeared, screening a narrow cleft, and the horse crashed into it, breaking a headlong path. The growth closed behind horse and rider and the sound of threshing was carried back with a yell of pain. Then silence.

"Go in after him, Sergeant Hughes," ordered Finlay. "He's probably been knocked out. Column, form up!"

Once again he had a tight formation, and he needed one in this danger area.

He was a tough, trained combat captain who, in his early thirties but looking older, knew his job. Lean of body, he had a hard jaw and clear eyes set well apart. He had learned to think and act fast on the frontier in order to live, and his shoulder bars had been earned the hard way.

"Captain!" Sergeant Hughes' shout traveled through the wall of brush, and it seemed to be from some distance away. "I have found something!"

"What is it, Sergeant?"

"Another Little Big Horn. Better come look."

Finlay urged his horse toward the wall, calling over his shoulder, "Corporal Hodge, dismount and hold the column on the alert. Send forward and halt the point."

The chapparral into which he thrust his mount gave easily before him and, fending away the branches, he made rapid progress. He came out into a small, grassy valley circled by thirty-foot rock walls that the chaparral had hidden.

SERGEANT HUGHES sat his horse some fifty yards away with O'Brien beside him, gingerly feeling an ugly bruise on his forehead where a branch had slashed. Finlay trotted up and stopped.

"What's this about Little Big Horn, Hughes? Are you loco?"

"Not so loco, Captain. Maybe it ain't another Little Big Horn, but it looks like a massacre. Lookit them skeletons—a couple dozen of 'em."

Now Finlay saw the whitened bones, the fleshless skulls that lay here and there, half-hidden in the grass or dotting patches of tawny sand. Years ago men had fought and died here in some unknown action, just another unrecorded combat of the frontier. Desert heat and desert cloud-bursts had poured on them year after year, wasting their clothes to shreds, rusting the arms that lay beside them.

In the tatters the elements had left there seemed to be some kind of likeness to a uniform, but it was none that Finlay could identify. Nor could he identify the make of the muskets with the bayonets attached.

"Long, long ago it was, Captain," said Hughes. In his broad weathered face was curiosity. "The grass has sprouted between their ribs. That one yonder is sprouting something else."

Finlay dismounted and walked to the skeleton from whose breast the long object he indicated protruded. It was an officer's sword, so unusually long and thin it resembled a rapier. The solid flesh through which it had driven long since had vanished, and he drew it easily from the ground that held it upright. Rust covered the hilt and blade in a heavy coat, but the steel was still strong.

"Soldiers fought here," he said. "But they weren't ours."

"Mexes, you think?" offered Hughes. "Rurales maybe, that Apaches jumped?"

"That could be."

Finlay began to walk in a circle, staring at the charnel evidence all around—the bones of mules, and the remnants of wicker panniers beside the relics of dead men. Eight or nine skeletons lay in one group, and he began to picture in his mind a tough corps of veterans, back to back, selling their lives dearly. The skulls of some of them had been horribly beaten in.

His boot struck something hard and he bent down and picked up a flint-headed hand ax. He balanced the sword in one hand, the ax in the other, then he tossed the ax away.

"Apaches it was, Hughes," he said decisively. "Hopped some kind of train. They don't leave their own dead behind."

A strange sense of uneasiness began to

seep up in him as he let his gaze rove over the small valley of death, stretching silent in the sunshine to a big pyramidal rock looming under the far cliff wall. It must be, he thought, that the mystery of the battle was whetting his feeling of immediate danger.

A black shadow swept over the grass and veered away. He looked up into the hot, blue arch and saw the vulture that had sailed down from the heights, drawn no doubt by the sight of living men. Buzzards were so notoriously long-lived that this one might even have feasted here on that long-ago day. Captain Finlay's spine went cold and he pulled himself together only with effort.

"Nothing we can do here, Hughes," he said. "Shove this sword in your carbine scabbard and have it cleaned up for me at the fort. I'll keep it for a souvenir. We've both run into plenty of skeletons before."

"That we have, sir," the sergeant agreed. "They're a dime a dozen out here."

"So we'll be going on. We'll never know what happened here or to whom it happened. There'll be no entry of this action on our records up north of the Border."

"Nothing whatsoever, Captain."

Finlay swung into saddle and kneed his horse. Then he stopped abruptly, pulling around to face the skeletons.

"They were soldiers, after all, whoever they were, Sergeant," he said. "Attention!"

THE sergeant and the rookie stiffened in their saddles. Finlay's gauntlet flashed to the rim of his stetson in a perfect salute and fell.

"Back to the column," he snapped.

They passed through the chaparral and out into the canyon where the troopers waited beside their horses. Finlay motioned his men to mount, and led the column on down the gut.

Time dragged slowly as it always did in this land of murderous heat and thirst. The halted point of three men came into sight and Finlay waved them forward. They disappeared around a bend in the canyon and the column plodded on. Another two miles and they would be through the mountain wall and out into the desert, with a clear march to Fort Sibley.

Finlay rode wearily but watchfully, thrusting out of his mind the futile questions that somehow kept creeping in. The men who had made their last stand in the valley of the skeletons—who had they been? What had they been doing there?

He swung his canteen off his pommel, unscrewed the cap and tilted in a few mouthfuls of heated water. One more reconnaissance was drawing to a close, one more scout that had showed plenty of sign of Apaches in moccasin prints and embers of camp fires, but the Apaches, as usual, had remained invisible. It was back to the dreary grind of post routine, the monotony of garrison duty.

"Halt!"

The call came clearly from around the bend. The point had run into something. Finlay set his column in motion, trotting fast. The walls of the canyon fell away into wider space, dotted with boulders and cactuses, and the point had bunched around two figures on horseback. A string of three pack-mules had halted behind them.

"Some locoed prospector shoving his nose into trouble," grunted Sergeant Hughes. "Hell, he's brought a woman!"

Reining down, Captain Finlay studied the strangest prospector he had ever seen.

The man of around fifty, in prospector's dusty garb was no ordinary pick-and-pan, desert-dried gold hunter. He sat erect in his saddle with the stamp of military life on his well-drilled shoulders, and the iron-gray mustache and imperial about his firm mouth were the trademarks of the French Army. Clear gray eyes looked out determinedly from the sun-bronzed, aristocratic face, channeled with lines of past suffering and hardship.

But no suffering or hardship had as yet marred the face of the raven-haired girl in riding garb at his side, and whose cameo-like features bore a marked resemblance to his. Youth and loveliness had come to this grim canyon in Apacheland and Kent Finlay felt inside him a sudden warm tingling of anticipation. Something was stirring in him that no girl had ever stirred before.

"Captain Finlay, Fort Sibley," said Finlay. "May I ask your names?"

"I am Jean Ravigny, of no particular

place." The roughly clad rider made a bow that would have done him credit at a court reception. "This is my daughter, Denise."

From saddle, Finlay gave his best West Point bow in return.

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Revigny —Miss Denise. Very pleased, indeed, to have met you at this point so that I can warn you against going any further in your prospecting expedition and turn you around. You'll have the protection of my troop on the way back to Fort Sibley."

"Turn around? My daughter and I go back? *Jamais, Monsieur le Capitan!*" Cold light flickered in the Frenchman's gray eyes, his imperial jutted.

"Apaches, Mr. Revigny. Sign all over, south of here. Your life and your daughter's wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel without a troop cover. You can't go on."

THE Frenchman's head went back. "I must. It is not only the prospecting expedition upon which I go, but the performance of a sacred trust. I have given my word. *Tiens, c'est tout!*"

"Sorry, sir, but that isn't all. Part of a soldier's job out here is to order white settlers and prospectors to keep out of Apache territory, and if they refuse to see that those orders are enforced."

"You give me orders to turn around? To retreat, possibly within sight of success?"

"I do. Certainly until the Apaches have withdrawn."

"And I refuse to obey! *Voyez vous, Monsieur le Capitan,* we stand now several miles within the border of Mexico. In Mexico do the orders of a United States cavalry captain hold good to a citizen of France?"

"And that ain't no guardhouse law," muttered Sergeant Hughes.

The words carried, and Finlay glared at the non-com. A dull feeling of futility oppressed him, for he knew that Revigny was right. But he meant to persist, switching his argument from the Frenchman to the man's daughter.

"Miss Denise," he said, "you surely must realize that this is no place for a woman."

"Where my father goes I go," she said and her small chin was resolute.

For which her father had four unmistakable words.

"And so—*en avant!*"

II

REVIGNY clapped his heels into his mount's flanks and the horse broke into a sharp trot. Denise swung in after him and the three pack-mules followed. They were all trotting fast along the canyon track and a hundred yards away before Finlay realized it.

"Damn his armor-plated French head," the captain cursed. "I'm going after him and bring him back by force, if necessary."

"And he'll resist, sir," cautioned Hughes.

"Let him. I'll—" at something he saw beyond, his words were cut off as sharply as with a knife. "Corporal Hodge," he barked, "cut loose your squad and follow me! Sergeant Hughes, take over! Apaches!"

Where nothing but cactus and boulders and sand had stretched an instant before, abruptly yelling, half-naked copper-hued figures burst into view. A full score of them were leaping from their cover toward Revigny and the girl, driving in viciously on foot to swarm over them and take them alive.

Finlay's spurs slammed ruthlessly into his mount's flanks, and at wild velocity he was charging down into the mêlée. Revigny was sitting his halted horse, his revolver out, as easily and coolly he fired. Apache after Apache went down. But when he had run through his cylinder there would be no time to reload. The Apaches would have him. And they would have Denise!

In seconds the canyon had become a maelstrom of insane screeching and shooting. Finlay flashed a look over his shoulder that showed him a mass of braves boiling out from screens of mesquite and boulders.

The crash of carbine fire from the troop met them. Hughes was keeping the men in saddle, ready to strike in any direction. He'd ward off the Apache onset at Finlay's rear, but in front of Finlay more Apaches already were on Revigny and the girl. They had the Frenchman by the leg, were trying to pull him to ground while he struck at long-maned skulls with his revolver barrel.

A brave had leaped up behind Denise and gripped her around the waist as her riding quirt lashed into the faces of others.

"Sabers!" The command ripped from Finlay as he tore his steel from scabbard.

No pistol fire was possible with the Indians swarming over the pair as they were. But instantly Captain Finlay was hurtling his mount for the girl. His heavy blade came up and crashed on the skull of a yelling brave whose lance whipped past his side. He yanked his horse to a skidding halt and drove his steel home in the side of the paint-streaked buck who was holding Denise.

Around him in the chaos he heard curses, shouts and thudding of sabers on bone, the savage screeching of stricken Apaches as they lashed out with their own weapons. It was white against redskin, trooper against desert warrior, blow for blow and life for life in a whirlpool of dust.

And then Finlay had Denise's mount by the bridle and was swinging the horse around. Over the sprawled bodies of their dead and wounded the Apaches were running for cover.

"Back to the column men!" shouted Finlay. "You all right, Revigny?"

"Of a certainty, *Monsieur le Capitan,*" called Revigny, coolly reloading. "So far we do well. But there is more to come."

There was plenty more to come, Finlay saw, as he rushed his squad back for the main body, engulfed now in eddies of powder-smoke. Past the drifting smoke he glimpsed the scores of coppery bodies racing to form a wall across the canyon and bar the breakout. The Apaches would knock over the troop column like so many pigeons if they could form full strength.

"Take the column through, Sergeant!" Finlay shouted again. "They're massing! I'll cover the rear!"

Hughes' bellow lifted over the firing, and the blue column went into the gallop.

THERE was no better non-com west of the Mississippi than Hughes, Finlay knew. The veteran sergeant would handle the head

A short, barrel-chested Indian moved forward, loosening his hand ax

of the column in its try for a breakout as well as he himself could. He closed the gap between his squad and the rear of the column and dropped the bridle of the girl's mount.

"Keep up with the troopers is all you have to do," he said to her. "They'll cover you."

"I shall," she said firmly.

Finlay reined down, let his troopers pound by him, then fell in at the rear, racing with Revigny who was riding as a single file in front of him. Through a gauntlet of howling Apaches the column charged, firing from saddle. Bronzed hands clutched at them, arrows winged and rifle shots crashed, but the troopers flung off the attackers and pounded at full gallop along the canyon track.

Then sudden high-pitched yelling from the Apaches, and an upward welling of revolver explosions, told Finlay the front of the storming column had hit the barrier of the Indians' main force. But there was no halt to the thunder of calvary hooves, no pause in the breakneck gallop.

Sergeant Hughes' exultant roar carried back. "Going through! Blow 'em to hell!"

Finlay spurred abreast of Revigny who rode calmly, with his reloaded gun held high. They flashed past Apaches, raggedly strung along the track; the rear of the column's passage was strewn with wrecked coppery bodies. Three arrow-transfixed figures on the ground in blue showed where the point, surprised in silence, had gone down.

Finlay yelled, "We'll make it, Revigny, in the next two minutes! Or we'll go bust."

"Oui, monsieur. But the charge has great force. It—"

"Guard right, Revigny! Duck!"

A shot cracked even as Finlay's warning came. On a jut in the towering boulder beside the trail loomed a wide-shouldered figure wearing the yellow-beaded headband of a chief had his rifle aimed squarely at the galloping Frenchman. The spit of flame and smoke broke and Revigny's hat lifted on his head. Finlay had a fractional second's glimpse of a cruel, falcon-beaked face with icy blue eyes, topped with a short mane of light reddish hair. The warrior's skin was burned to the color of an Indian's, but Finlay knew he was looking on no Indian.

His gun was up and he triggered, but no recoil came. Along the battle track he had fired his cylinder! The rifleman levered fast, drawing his bead on Revigny!

"Spur for it, Revigny!"

Revigny spurred, but he also shot. A lock of red hair blew away from the brave's head.

"Dieu!" the Frenchman groaned. "I missed!"

A second rifle shot cracked out but the slug went wide of Revigny, bent low on his mount's back and racing. Finlay pounded hard behind him, slashed at an Apache who leaped at his flank, felt the blow go home, and ripped his saber back. At a mad gallop the column tore on, trailing its cloud of powder-smoke and broken Apaches. And suddenly there were no more Apaches, there was no more shooting, there was only the drumming of hooves. The column burst out of the canyon onto open, tawny desert and Hughes pulled them slowly down. Finlay galloped to the head of the troop and signaled for a halt.

"Good going, Hughes," he commended. "What are the casualties?"

"Besides losing the point we got about six wounded, only two of 'em bad, sir," the sergeant reported. "Hit in the upper body, but they can ride."

"Lash them on behind troopers and we'll travel as fast as we can for the post and the hospital . . . Revigny!"

"Yes, Captain Finlay?"

"Fall in with your daughter behind me at the head of the column. When we get to the fort I'll take you to Colonel Lawrence, and he'll arrange quarters for you."

"We already have quarters at the fort in one of the sutler's cottages, *mon capitan,"* the Frenchman informed. "We arrived at the post two days ago and I am using it for a base. My heavy gear and my daughter's baggage are already in the cottage."

"Good! Pull your scarves over your faces and we're off for twenty miles of Arizona dust. No time for conversation now. I want my casualties in the hospital pronto."

He didn't want to talk on the way, for he had too much on his mind. A white Apache, a Frenchman risking his life on a mission of mystery, and a startlingly lovely girl who would be risking her life also.

III

CAPTAIN FINLAY lifted the heavy felt stetson from his head, fanned his overheated face with it and put it back on, the sweatband sticky against his brow. Darkness had fallen hours ago and now he stood on the firing platform staring over the moonlit desert, trying to get some relief from the heat before turning in.

He had seen his casualties safely into the hospital, and had made his report to Colonel Lawrence, who had taken the news of the white Apache with a frowning seriousness, and put the works into motion. Dog-tired, Finlay had made it to his quarters and bathed, and had slept until evening mess where he had answered the questions of his fellow officers which came in an endless stream. Finally he had broken away for a solitary cigar on the firing ramp.

He hadn't heard anything from Jean Revigny or Denise since he had entered the stockade with his column. They had turned aside for the sutler's cottage next to the trading post before reaching the gate, and he knew better than to try to call at a Frenchman's home without an invitation.

Revigny didn't look like the kind of father, French or any other kind, who would encourage a young man to pay attentions to his daughter after one meeting. It would be a long time before he saw Denise again, Finlay thought, and he would have to be patient. Only he wasn't patient. Right now he was staring at the sutler's cottage without realizing that he had been doing just that for the last fifteen minutes.

A sudden glow appeared in the door of the cottage and a slender figure was framed there in the soft lamplight. Denise had paused on the threshold before leaving the house to walk slowly across the sand toward the fenced-in post cemetery. Denise, out for a walk in the night air, escaping from the day's stifling heat still confined in the low-roofed cottage.

Here was an unexpected chance for Finlay to see her. And out on the desert a man learned to act quickly.

He swung down the ladder, nodded to the gate sentry and stepped out through the sallyport, walking fast. Denise was leaning on the rough rail of the fence surrounding the burying ground, looking out across the desert, her head lifted to the vagrant night breeze. She looked ethereal and lovely in the wash of moonlight.

"Miss Denise," said Finlay, and she turned around. A warm smile lit her face as she recognized him. "I thought I'd join you, if you don't mind. Young ladies shouldn't go wandering around the desert at night without an escort."

"No?" she said lightly. "It's very peaceful."

"The desert always seems peaceful at night," he murmured. "The dark hides everything." He felt his pulses beginning to quicken. The impact this girl had on him was mounting by the second and he fell back on banalities. "I hope you're comfortably fixed. Your father is all right?"

"My father is sitting in one of his silent moods. His eyes are turned inward on something in the past and he is engulfed in the memory of it."

"Some memory is haunting him? Does this happen often?"

"How do I know? I have only known my father for one month."

An ejaculation of surprise broke from Finlay. But she quickly and frankly explained.

"My mother died when I was born and I was brought up by an aunt, my father's sister, in a small French provincial town. All I ever remember her telling me about my father was that he was an officer who served abroad in various armies, what you call a soldier of fortune. Ten years ago my aunt in France died and I was sent to another relative of a branch of my father's family that had emigrated to New Orleans. I was brought up there, and then my Cousin Helene moved to San Francisco, where there was a growing French colony, and I lived in Frisco until my father wrote me to join him on the frontier at Carrville, the rail station fifty miles or so from this post. So I came on to Carrville one month ago."

DENISE paused, her eyes shadowed.

"Yes?" prompted Finlay. "And you met your father?"

"I saw him for the first time in my memory, and he is all that I ever hoped him to be. He is kind and gentle and affectionate, but he is a man of an *idée' fixe,* a single idea. He says that he has a mission to perform, a promise to fulfill, that means the finding of some tremendous treasure. He has spent the last ten years at it, prospecting through every danger and hardship, using Carrville for the base from which he goes down into Old Mexico where the treasure lies. Two weeks ago he decided to start casting his search to the west and he brought me here with him. Somehow he thinks he is on the right track at last. Some Indian or old prospector—I don't know who—seems to have given him the clue he has been seeking. That in brief, Captain Finlay, is all I can tell you about us."

Finlay nodded. It was just about the oldest story on the frontier, no matter how new it might be to this girl. The treasure-hunter with a single fanatical dream in his head, chasing a fortune that ninety per cent of the time didn't even exist. Some old map, some dying old prospector's ravings, some frontier legend had turned the European soldier of fortune into a lonely treasurer-hunter who would go on and on as long as life remained, still clinging to false hope.

"Your father may be on the right track," he said at last, "but he'll have to abandon his search now for a long, long time. You know what happened today. There's a new Apache menace loose on the Border and until it's cleaned up it means death for any white man to prospect in Indian-infested territory. This menace is led by a new Apache leader who may rally heaven knows how many more warriors, and the fight may go on indefinitely."

"My father is not giving up the search, if it takes the rest of his life," she said, with deep conviction.

"He may have to wait for years," Finlay insisted.

"Then he'll wait for years. Right here at this fort. He says it is the nearest base."

"Ah!"

Pleasure and eagerness ran warm in Finlay's veins. From now on this slender girl from France might be his constant companion. Her beauty would lighten the drabness of the sun-baked fort, propinquity might in time bring them to—what?

The dull cloud that had hung heavy in Kent Finlay's mind had blown away. The future lay bright before him. He reached out on impulse and his hand closed over the girl's hand lying on the railing.

"I am glad—glad that—"

He jerked his head up and his hand away. Brassy and clear the bugle lifted inside the stockade.

"That's Officers' Call, Miss Denise. It's for a meeting in which we'll discuss the means of getting rid of the new Apache danger. I'll have to go. But I'll see you tomorrow. May I call at your cottage?"

"I'm sorry. I shan't be there. I won't be anywhere near here."

"Not near here?" he exclaimed incredulously. "Why, there's no place for you to go. Your father is staying, and you—"

"My father is staying, but he is sending me back to San Francisco to my Cousin Helene, because of the Apache danger. By the stage that leaves shortly after dawn."

"You—you're leaving?"

Again the notes of Officers' Call ripped through the night, and instinctively Finlay turned his face toward the fort. She said:

"You'll have to go now, I know, and answer that call. And since there's no reason why you should see me off tomorrow we might as well say good-by here and now."

Her hand was out and somehow he found it in his. But it didn't seem warm now; it seemed firm and cool.

"Thank you again, Captain Finlay," she murmured, "for what you did for us. Good-by."

HE COULD see her again at the stage if he wanted to, but what would be the good of it? He'd see a veiled, wrapped-up figure and he'd hold a stiffly-gloved hand for an instant. Then, to the creaking of thoroughbraces and the rising of dust, Denise Revigny would go out of his life. It would be better if she went now.

"Good-by, Denise."

The pang was in him as he strode for the gate, sharp and cruel, and it wasn't going to be a short pang. He clenched his teeth,

the desert dust in his mouth bitter as ashes. He walked fast through the gate, seeing the officers emerging from barracks and other buildings, and making for the officers' mess next to Headquarters. A dim shape shouldered out of his own troop's barracks and cut him off just short of Headquarters.

"Might as well give this to you here, sir," said Sergeant Hughes, holding out a thin, cloth-wrapped object. "I've cleaned it up pretty. It's quite a coincidence."

"It's a what? You talk like a college professor."

"Well, then call it one of them damn queer happenstances that are always going on out here."

Finlay motioned dismissal to the sergeant and went on into the officers' mess. He found a place at the long table and put the object Hughes had given him on the vacant seat at his side. He knew it was the sword from the valley of skeletons, but it could wait.

The rest of the officers who had arrived before him had been dallying over their weak whiskies and water after dinner while they swapped the dull routine talk of post life. But now they seemed alert, uneasy, tense, for war was in the offing.

Then through the door stalked Colonel Lawrence. There was a frown between his thick eyebrows, and a yellow field form crumpled in his hand. A graying commander, versed in frontier warfare by experience; hard, able and respected. He reached the end of the table, opened the message, and said:

"This is the latest from Department Headquarters, gentlemen. It speaks for itself. I shall read it aloud."

In a level voice he quoted:

> Use all forces at your command to put down Apache danger. Braves on reservation have showed marked unrest for last two weeks. New Apache leader must be disposed of or they may stage breakout to join him.

A mutter ran up and down the table and Colonel Lawrence raised his hand for silence.

"I think you are all sufficiently familiar with what happened on Captain Finlay's patrol. We know we have this mysterious white Apache to deal with and nothing whatever is known about him—how he plans, how he fights, what he wants to gain. So we shall be starting from scratch and—"

Lawrence's eyes traveled above Finlay's head. He was looking at the door, surprised.

"Captain Jean Revigny, late of the French Army," said a composed voice. "I understand, *Monsieur le Colonel,* that you hold a council of war concerning the Apache and I am wondering if I might have the courtesy of attending? I, too, in the cavalry have fought the natives on the desert, and all desert wars are alike. What is the Arab but an Indian in a burnoose and a beard?"

Finlay knew that the surprise he read in the faces of his fellow officers was mirrored in his own. Gone were the prospector's weather-beaten and patched clothes, and Revigny stood erect in a vivid foreign uniform with colorful facings and heavy gold epaulets. His back was like a ramrod, his pose was dominating, he was a trained soldier from braided kepi to spurred boots. As he finished speaking he bowed from the waist.

Colonel Lawrence bowed back in a short inclination. "You are welcome as an old campaigner, Captain Revigny." He motioned toward the empty chair beside Finlay. "Sit down, please."

"Merci, mon Colonel."

REVIGNY nodded in recognition to Finlay and moved to the place beside him. There was a clash on the floor as Revigny's knee brushed the wrapped object off the seat.

"Your pardon, Capatin Finlay."

"It's quite all right, Captain Revigny. It's just a *souvenir de guerre* I picked up this morning before we met."

He bent down for the sword that lay exposed on the floor for its wrapping had fallen off. He lifted the weapon to table level and in the lamplight its steel glistened like new. Sergeant Hughes had done a remarkable job on a remarkable weapon with all the cavalryman's love for good arms. This was a beautiful blade, set in a beautiful hilt on which the name engraved was:

> Capitan Jean Revigny

Sergeant Hughes had been right as usual,

thought Finlay. One more damned queer happenstance had turned up on the frontier.

"Yours, I believe, Captain Revigny," he said quietly, and held the sword out. "Lost for years."

IV

INTO Jean Revigny's eyes burned a strange light. It was more than the light of recognition as he took the sword in his grasp. It was the light of hope.

"Where did you find this, Captain?" he asked, in a voice a bit choked. "Yes, it is mine. Lost and sought for for ten years."

"I found it in a valley of skeletons in the west wall of the canyon where we met, about a mile south of our meeting spot," Finlay explained to him. "The skeletons were in the remains of uniforms, and this sword transfixed one. I gave it to my sergeant to be cleaned."

"It is clean again. And I am ready for service again."

"You what?"

Finlay stared in amazement. A new youth and vigor seemed to fill the French officer, as though years of bitterness and frustration had suddenly fallen away.

"Gentlemen, your attention!"

At the head of the table Colonel Lawrence held a new field message form which had been brought in by a signals runner who stood beside him. Every officer at the table was looking at him, and Finlay realized that no one at all had noticed his earnest talk with Revigny.

"An additional message from Department supplementing the one I received a short time ago," the colonel announced. "It states that two companies of infantry for garrison troops have entrained and are due here at dusk tomorrow. That will loose this post's entire cavalry force for attack on the white Apache, or for ambush. I favor attack before the reservation can rise. To ambush might take weeks. I figure to send out scouts to locate the Apache immediately and follow fast as soon as they find him. As I said, to lay a proper ambush would take time, and time we have not got." His level gaze searched the gathering. "Any suggestions?"

"You can ambush before noon tomorrow."

"What is that?" The colonel's voice rose, surprised. "You spoke, Captain Revigny?"

"I did, *mon Colonel.* You want to know what can draw the white Apache out of his lair and into a trap? I can."

Curiosity ran through the room like something tangible. The officers stared at the Frenchman in the colorful uniform. The soldier of fortune went on:

"The White Apache and I know each other of old, and we are bitter enemies. He will do anything that he can to get me into his hands, because of information I possess that he desires. I will go back alone into his territory and draw him into your ambush."

"How?" Lawrence shot out.

"He will be expecting me to come back some time and he will have his Apaches out, waiting. They will capture me and take me to him and I, in turn, shall lead him to the valley of the skeletons which Captain Finlay has described to you. It is an ideal spot for a trap, walled and small, with only the one outlet. You can box the White Apache in there with the troops while he is questioning me."

"And what will happen to you?"

The heavy gold epaulets on Revigny's shoulder rose and fell in a shrug.

"A soldier takes his risks."

Colonel Lawrence rested his elbow on the table and, chin in hand, studied the French soldier for seconds of tense quiet.

"Captain Revigny," he said then, "you wouldn't have a chance. If the Apaches didn't kill you offhand, what would happen to you while we were surrounding the valley and breaking in?"

"The decoy party is always risked in an ambush," murmured the French officer.

"But, dammit, it, the decoy party is on the run with a chance to escape, and if a man or two is lost that is part of the military operation! You want to go in alone. You'd be a sitting turkey."

"A sitting turkey is a better bait than a flying turkey, *mon Colonel,*" Revigny assured, matter-of-factly.

LAWRENCE shook his head, his face dark with thought. "No, Captain Revigny, I have no right deliberately to throw away a man who isn't even a member of my

force or a citizen of this country in a war against the Apache. I had already formed a tentative plan for an ambush before coming here. I can get Murphree to pull in his grazing horse herd on that ranch of his between us and the Border, and when the White Apache sees that prize all corraled up and waiting I figure he'll raid. And I'll have my troops hidden in the barns and outbuildings, waiting for him."

"So you refuse my plan?" Revigny asked stiffly.

"Definitely. But you can still help us by telling us what you know about this white Apache. What is his name?"

"What does his original name matter now that he is known as the White Apache? What does it matter where I knew him or under what circumstances? I would prefer not to have my privacy invaded, *mon Colonel.* But I can tell you this: The White Apache will fight with the brilliance of a white officer's mind and military intelligence, allied to the craft of the Indian in that painted renegade body of his. He was, when I knew him, a ruthless soldier of fortune and he still is, only now he leads fighting men with red skins who have no more mercy in them than he has in him. He not only will know how to fight in the open and how to ambush with deadly effect as an Apache, but if the braves from the reservation flock to him in great force as a trained former white officer he will know how to attack this fort."

NATURE NOTE

•

The skunk's a friendly little cuss,
So kind, so sweet and gentle—
You'll find him playful and polite,
And very scent-imental.

— *Pecos Pete*

Revigny rose to his feet with the sword shining under his arm and bowed.

"And now, *mon Colonel,* since you do not seem to require any advice or services from me, I shall retire."

With his back ramrod-stiff, Jean Revigny walked to the door and out through it onto the moonlit parade ground, injured dignity in every inch of his bearing. Colonel Lawrence still wore his puzzled look.

"Strange that a man should resent my refusal to let him sacrifice himself uselessly," he said. "But the French are peculiarly touchy. We certainly need every bit of information Revigny can give us regarding the White Apache, whether it invades his privacy or not . . . Captain Finlay, will you go after him and smooth his feathers down? Convey my apologies to him if I have hurt his feelings as a fellow soldier."

"Yes, sir," said Finlay. He went fast and caught Revigny striding through the deserted parade ground for the gate.

"Pardon me, Captain Revigny," he said. "The colonel's compliments and he hopes he has not offended you. After all, he is in command of this post, and he is a commander who likes to make his own decisions."

"He is entitled to make his own decisions," returned Revigny courteously. "In this case I fear he has made one that will cost the lives of hundreds of troopers and women and children in a long war that my plan would end at a single stroke. But enough of the colonel for the present. I have not sufficiently thanked you as yet for what you did for my daughter and myself. Would you care to accompany me to our cottage where I can offer you such hospitality as lies within my power? A nightcap or so at the end of a hard day's soldiering?"

"A nightcap—" Finlay smiled—"would go very well."

Beyond the gate the night stretched black, with thick clouds screening the light of the moon, and the baking heat of the day still rose from the sand. Finlay felt oppressed as he walked along beside the French soldier of fortune, leaving the high log wall of the stockade behind and heading for the handful of buildings dominated by the sutler's store. The only cheerful sign in sight was the

warm glow of lamplight streaming from the open windows of the cottage. Finlay felt that he was doing himself no good by deliberately seeing Denise again after he had made the break with her, but there was the chance that as host in his own living quarters Revigny's fierce French pride might unbend and he would talk about the White Apache. And information concerning the White Apache was what Colonel Lawrence had ordered Finlay to get.

FINLAY wanted it himself. He had a definite hankering to know the circumstances of the fight in the valley of the skeletons, and the secret that Jean Revigny carried locked within him.

"Please to enter, *mon ami.*" Revigny held the door open and Finlay stepped into the cottage. The living room was crude, indifferently furnished, but the girl who sat in the rawhide chair made it seem a place of graciousness. She looked up and there was quick surprise in her face, followed by a faint flush, as she saw Finlay.

"Captain Finlay has returned to me a sword I prize greatly and lost long ago, Denise," Revigny explained to her. "I have invited him in for some slight refreshment. Will you bring the Spanish sherry and the special cups?"

"Certainly, *mon pére.*"

Denise moved into the adjoining room and Revigny crossed to the stone fireplace. He laid his sword across the wooden pegs above it. His eyes went shadowed.

"There has always been a sword above the Revigny hearth," he murmured. "Your arms, Captain Finlay? You will be more comfortable without their weight."

"Quite right, Captain Revigny," said Finaly.

He stepped to the fireplace, unbuckled his gun-belt, folded it and laid it with the Colt in its holster on the end of the stone mantel. At a wave of his host's hand he took his seat at the center table.

Denise came in and laid a Mexican tray before her father. On it rested a dusty bottle and three of the most perfect paper-thin gold cups Finlay had ever seen. Revigny poured, and passed a cup to Finlay.

"You will find this amazingly fine old sherry, Captain Finlay. The loot, no doubt, from some spacious hacienda below the Border that passed through who knows how many hands before it reached the sutler here. He is not the man to inquire where such sherry came from as long as it is a good buy. . . . *A votre santé, monsieur.*"

Three beautiful cups were raised, and the warm glow of a superb vintage ran through Finlay's veins. He lowered his cup and stared at it in amazement. He could see a marvelously chased coat-of-arms, and beneath it a crown.

"These cups," he said. "I've never seen anything like them. They look as though they had belonged to royalty."

"I have served in several of the courts of Europe," said Revigny. "And royalty is often grateful. Yes, these are royal cups. At present in my keeping."

"What—" Finlay began, and stopped short. Instinct warned him to ask nothing directly, to let the potency of the wine work on Revigny as it was working on him, and perhaps as the cups were refilled it would break down his secrecy. "What workmanship!" he finished.

"Indeed it is. I have drunk from these cups in palace halls."

"Ah!"

"And so has the White Apache."

Finlay held his breath, letting the last of the wine go down his throat. There was a strange gleam in Revigny's face. Its stiffness seemed to have loosened.

"Yes," repeated the Frenchman. "We are enemies today, but we were comrades-in-arms once. He turned traitor, and there in the valley of the skeletons—" Revigny lifted the dusty bottle and refilled Finlay's cup. "Drink deeply," he murmured. "I feel in the mood for memory."

V

FINLAY drank, keeping his mouth closed. In only minutes now he would have the secret, loosened from its years of captivity in Jean Revigny's breast. And then the Frenchman spoke, slowly at first, experimentally, but in a deeply reminiscent voice. "For these many years the skeletons have

been lying, as you describe your finding it, in the west wall of the canyon, a mile below the scene of our battle with the White Apache. Behind a thin screen of mesquite, is it not?"

"It's a big screen now, Mr. Revigny," Finlay said softly. "It's grown since you fought there. No one would ever dream a valley lay beyond it."

"Nor does the White Apache know of it or he would not be leading a band of savages in a wilderness. He would be lolling at his ease in the capitals of Europe, rich on the loot of a traitor. For a priceless treasure lies there in the valley. . . . Will you give me your promise of silence if I tell you my full story? If I told it to Colonel Lawrence he would have to reveal it in his official report to Department and to Washington, and a leak would be inevitable. Then hundreds, thousands, of hungry treasure-hunters would start to seep into this territory and it would be bound to be discovered. You promise, Captain Finlay?"

"I promise," said Finlay.

Denise leaned forward. Finlay's own eagerness was mirrored in her face, and he realized that she was as anxious as he to turn this page in of her father's past.

Beyond her the shabby window curtains wavered a little in a vagrant wind. Then between them, framed as though in a picture, suddenly materialized a dark, predatory face with a mane of reddish hair above it bound with a yellow head-band. Menacing blue eyes were fixed in a glare.

"The White Apache!" Denise screamed. "There!"

"Aiiiieee!"

As the low screech sounded, over the sills of the open windows and through the flung-open door boiled a mass of copper-hued bodies. Finlay reared upright, drove his clenched fist into a writhing savage face before him, but reeled backward as another Indian body hit him, and both went down. Under sweating, foul-smelling flesh, his head struck the floor. He lay there only dimly conscious that the room was filled with Apaches and that they had Revigny and Denise pinioned.

The White Apache towered in the light from the overhead kerosene lamp, confronting Revigny, and in his falcon-beaked face was malignant triumph. He was naked except for breechclout and knee-length moccasins and about him was the odor of rancid animal grease. A white man who had gone back to the very abyss of savagery.

"Diaz!" broke from Revigny.

The White Apache smiled horribly. "Yes, Revigny, I am Hernando Diaz. And I have found you at last." He spoke in swift Spanish, but it was not too swift for Finlay to follow. "Hours ago my scouts brought me word that you were staying outside the fort's walls. So I am here to take you with me."

"To take me where?"

Diaz laughed throatily. "Where do you think? Do I have to answer a question like that? You know what I want, and you know where it is."

"Taitor!"

"Adventurer, rather." Diaz, the White Apache, laughed again. "An adventurer in quest of a treasure and not particular as to the means by which he gets it. You are going to tell me where it is."

RIGID-FACED, Revigny stared at him, implacable resolve in his fine features.

"Never, Diaz!"

"I have told you that I am not particular as to the means I employ for my purpose, Revigny," mocked Diaz. "Or for that matter on whom I employ them. Your daughter goes with us."

"You dog! No!"

"*Si*, you stiff-necked fool! You are both French. Do you think the colonel of this fort will do anything immediate and desperate to rescue two French people? He will wait for reinforcements."

He barked something in Apache to a brave by the window who sent a soft cry traveling out. From far off sounded the thud of hooves, nearing fast.

"Outside, Revigny," ordered Diaz. "Here come the horses."

Finlay had made it to his feet and was leaning against the wall by the fireplace. No alarm, no shots had sounded from the firing platform of the fort. In the dark of the moon the White Apache and his crew had made

it, unseen, to the cottage. And the renegade was going to make a getaway from the cottage unseen. Right now Diaz' eyes were raking Finlay.

"You, Captain," he said, "I am not taking with me. I do not think your colonel will pursue to rescue French folk, but he most certainly would pursue in the case of a kidnaped officer of his command. Also you have heard too much in this room, and you know the kind of men who tell no tales."

"Yes," said Finlay.

"So one of my braves will take care of you."

Diaz snarled something more in Apache and a short, barrel-chested Indian moved forward, loosening his hand ax. Blood-lust glared in his eyes.

"Strike!"

The ax went back and came forward, and as it drove at Finlay he lashed out desperately with his boot. The heavy leather caught the Apache under his belt, his jaw dropped in shock and with a grunt he went backward, crashing into Diaz. Finlay's hand flashed for the holstered Colt lying within his reach on the stone mantelpiece beside him.

He levelled it and flame lanced into the chest of a brave who leaped, yelling, with knife out. As the Indian crumpled, Finlay swerved and drove his bullet into the overhead lamp. There was a crash and darkness swamped the room.

Leaping aside, Finlay crouched low, heard the thud of knives striking into the wall he had left. Diaz volleyed Apache and in a swirl of shadowy figures at which Finlay fired savagely, the Spanaird and his crew plunged out of the door with their prisoners.

The yells of sentries sounded from the fort then, and carbines roared. The alarm was out, but there was no chance of any sally from the stockade reaching the cottage in time to head off the escape of raiding Apaches and their white leader.

Finlay rushed for the door and burst into the open. Diaz and his Apaches had leaped onto the ponies which had been driven in by more Apaches from their hiding place out on the desert, Revigny and Denise had been flung aboard mounts, and were closely hemmed in.

They were off at top speed, racing into the darkness of the wasteland as Finlay, powerless to stop them, watched them. In the rear of the raiders a lone brave lagged, rocking on his pony's back from side to side. Suddenly he pitched to the sand and his pony, running for a few yards, stopped and stood still, bridle rope dragging loosely onto the sand.

Finley was pounding forward, passing the Apache whose naked chest was a mass of blood from the shot he had driven through it in the blacked-out cottage. With a sweep he caught up the rope rein and vaulted onto the pony's back, driving his boot heels into its flanks. He was acting too fast for thought as he fastened the shell-belt he had snatched off the mantelpiece around his waist—a single white man racing hard on the trail of a dozen raiders with no plan, with only the instinctive resolve to follow regardless of cost.

THE minutes of thudding hooves passed and the miles of desert went out behind. A quarter of a mile to the rear of Diaz and his crew Finlay rode, and as coolness crept back into his mind he kept the distance carefully. In the murky landscape he could go unnoticed for a long time, perhaps indefinitely, behind the raiders who expected no pursuit. Whatever plan he could evolve would have to come out of the immediate circumstances, but his mind was sharpening.

The moon broke through the clouds, washing the desert in clear silver. Far ahead, he made out the racing black dots going up the slope of a cactus-studded ridge he recognized. The Border now lay hardly more than ten miles away, so he could guess where Diaz was going.

He reached the ridge and went up it, dismounting behind the crest so that the moonlight would not betray his mounnted figure. The Apache group still was traveling fast for the mountain blur. It would be minutes before the moon slid again behind the cloud rack, and he would have to wait.

But in his brain, bit by bit, something was coming into being. Stripped to the waist, hatless, and riding an Indian pony he would

be indistinguishable from an Apache at a reasonable distance. He tied his pony to a rock outcropping and moved over to the nearest cactus bush. When he stepped back his hat and tunic and shirt hung on the cactus spines in the outlines of a weird scarecrow and his cavalry scarf was wound around his head like an Apache headband.

Untying the pony then, he led the Indian mount cautiously over the top of the ridge and, as the moon vanished, mounted and followed fast on the southward trail. . . .

The raw horror of what Kent Finlay had seen on that momentous ride in the wake of blood-mad Apaches, still clawed at his vitals as from the cover of a boulder he stared at the danger that lay ahead. Long ago the desert ride had ended, and he had abandoned his pony at the mouth of the canyon, to make the rest of his way afoot. No horse could be trusted to be noiseless, and with the moon riding once more in a cloudless arch, concealment of a rider on the canyon track would be impossible. Dismounted and taking advantage of every bush and boulder for cover he had made it along the wall of rock where the shadows and the chaparral were deep.

Now, hardly a hundred yards behind him, white bodies lay in the moonwash, horrible fragments of the veteran troopers they had been. It was lucky for Trooper Blair and McNeil and Jensen that in the ambush of the point they had pitched from their saddles dead. Their bodies had been stripped naked and disembowelled, their throats had been cut from ear to ear in Apache frenzy. Apaches led by Hernando Diaz even tortured corpses and the White Apache had given them a free hand to mutilate whites. Now Diaz was on ahead in the valley of the skeletons with his captives. Finlay could make out the blur of the mesquite screen that hid the valley's entrance from the canyon, and on a flat rock in front of it the lighter blur that was the Apache Diaz had left behind on watch.

The Apache rose, stretching, his back turned. Finlay made another twenty yards to a clump of boulders, crouched and running. This sentinel was no patient brave, for he kept jerking about and shaking his head as if something were on his mind.

Jumping down from the rock, he scooped up a handful of pebbles he began to throw idly at the bushes. He was coming around his rock, advancing toward Finlay, when he stopped. From the hidden valley, carrying over its rock walls and through the mesquite at its entrance insane screeching began, the howling of devils at work, the noises that Apaches would make when busy at the torture of human beings.

The sentinel's face writhed in anticipated pleasure. He whipped around and headed for the mesquite with soft steps, his moccasins making no sound in the sand. Finlay made none in his stockinged feet, either, as he ripped off his boots and raced toward his victim. He had seconds only in which to reach the Apache who was deserting his post in order to creep into the valley and see the sport.

FINLAY'S foot slipped on a stone. The Apache heard it and swung around. As his hand flashed steel from his belt his mouth opened to emit a yell of alarm. But it never emerged.

A heavy Colt barrel smashed down on his skull and sank through the bone. Without a sound the Indian pitched forward.

Finlay stood over him, panting a little. Then he bent down, and in a couple of swift movements had the moccasins off the dead Indian's feet and on his own. With the howling in the valley rising clearer he moved to the mesquite screen and pushed carefully through it on his hands and knees, trailing the Indian's rifle.

Moments later he crawled out into the valley and flattened himself on the ground, taking in the scene. Firelight glowed redly against the far west wall beyond the pyramidal rock and there was the movement of the Apaches' horses gathered in a bunch close to the wall on the north.

The rest was tall rough grass and bushes, with no enemies in sight between him and the rock. They would all be at the far cliff, drawn by the lure of savage sport. He went cold all over as he heard a dull hammering. He knew what that meant. A stake was being driven into the ground!

VI

THE firelight leaped higher as Captain Finlay stole forward, silent in his moccasins, heading for the pryramidal rock. Human bones from that long-ago fight now and then crunched under his feet. Once he stumbled into a hole and it threw him, but the Apaches' shrieking covered him.

As he came closer to the rock he began to blink in incredulity. Diaz and his Apaches were on its far side but the glow seemed to be cutting through the center of the rock itself. As he covered the last yards in a quick dash he could see the firelight dancing on the far side. He realized then that the base of the big pyramid was split by a narrow cleft that made it like a tent of stone, and that he was looking clean through cleft.

He hit the ground and crawled on his stomach, with the rock walls hemming him in and the stone narrowed to a V overhead. Halfway through the cleft his groping hands met cloth, the remnants of a blanket preserved from the weather through the years by the rock ceiling. A packed saddle-bag lay beside it, the leather still hard, and the straps firmly tied. Someone had been sleeping here, using his saddle-bag for a pillow, the old campaign trick, when battle had broken out.

Finlay shoved the bag against the wall and crawled on. From the edge of the cleft he stared out.

A stake had been driven beside a roaring fire, the light from the flames leaping far up the thirty-foot sheer wall of the valley. Jean Revigny and Denise stood beside the fire, ringed by Apaches. Diaz faced the two captors, hands on hips, moccasined legs braced apart. Gloating, he spat on the ground.

"It is a long time since we were in this valley, Revigny," he said.

"A long time, Diaz," answered Revigny. "And if you had not overheard the officer tell me where it was you would not be here now."

"I have the means to force any information I may desire out of you, you stubborn French dog. We will speak French and piece out the years. I do not wish my Apaches to understand."

"Nous parlons le Francais?" Revigny shrugged. "Does it matter if the threats are made in the language of politeness or not?"

"Whatever threat I make I shall carry out." Diaz's French was halting and rusty, and Finlay's own West Point French was good enough for him to follow the slowly pronounced words. "I missed the treasure once when we burst in on you in this valley, and I do not intend to miss it again."

"You and your murderous crew of uniformed looters! The rats who fled the palace just before it fell."

And Diaz snarled, "To follow hundreds of miles on the track of Captain Revigny, the trusted palace officer who was taking the treasure to safety. Two birds I sought with one stone—safety and a fortune. Once the secret of your departure was known it was easy to follow the trail of an armed guard with pack-mules, making for the American border. Ah, but it was a long, long trail from the royal palace to this valley where we caught up to you."

"And while we were locked in battle the Apaches hit us both."

"Leaving you for dead under that bush yonder while they dragged me off into captivity. Until I recognized you in the pass, Revigny, I never dreamed you still lived. How did you ever escape?"

"I hardly know. When I came to I was alone in a valley of dead men—my soldiers and your renegade deserters. An aged Apache camp follower found me and took me to his mountain *jacal*. Once a white prospector had nursed him back to health, so he felt he had a debt to pay. For weeks, I was delirious, with no idea where I was and it was months before I had fully regained my strength and was able to make it to an American border town far west of here. All I had of the treasure was three gold cups the old Apache had picked up. And I had no knowledge of where this valley really was.

"The Apache said it was a valley of evil omen and he did not want me ever to go back there. So for ten years I hunted for it, following every clue. I have found other valleys and canyons with skeletons, but never the right one. I had been searching more

than a hundred miles from the right spot. Then a month ago, a chance reminiscence by an old-timer in a barroom told of the skeletons in uniform in a hidden valley south of Fort Sibley."

DIAZ said mockingly, "So we meet again. I, too, have sought the valley for ten years, but my Apaches have been careful never to let me know where it was, for fear I would leave them. There has always been a legend, as you know, since the conquistadore days, of a blue-eyed, light-haired godlike leader who would come from the north and raise the Indians of Mexico to power and glory. I have blue eyes, I have light-red hair, so they spared me through their superstition and made me their leader and their god. But I am a god who is a prisoner of his own power. They never let me out of their sight. I have led them in raids on the white men of the Mexican haciendas, bringing them great loot, always asking for word of this valley and never receiving it. Then I moved north to harry the Americans, and you know the rest. For a long and weary while we have both been on the same hunt, Revigny."

"With different aims," said Revigny. "I seek to find a treasure to return it to its rightful owner. You seek the same treasure to steal it for yourself."

"Why not?" Diaz asked coolly. "Do you think I wish to be a savage, half-naked god forever? Do you think I prefer the copper-brown bodies of squaws to white women?"

"You were always a womanizer, Diaz. Do you remember that I challenged you to a duel because of your advances to a certain lady of the palace who did not have a father or a brother to defend her, and that you refused the challenge?"

"I did not wish to go up against your sword arm then, Revigny. Nor do I wish to go up against it now. You may call it caution, not cowardice."

"You were always one to demand the odds in his favor before fighting."

"In consequence my skin is still whole, Revigny, and the odds are all in my favor now. Enough of this talk. The gold plate and the ornaments from the pack-mules' panniers have been scattered in a score of camps and canyons by my Apaches, who care nothing for gold, and tired of them as gewgaws. But the main treasure, guarded by you personally, is still hidden in this valley. Where is it, Revigny?"

"That I shall never tell you!"

Diaz nodded toward the stake and the fire.

"I can torture you, Revigny."

"Try your torture!"

"I shall." Diaz smiled viciously. "But on your mind, not on your body. I shall tie your daughter, Denise, to the stake and let the Apaches work on her with splinters and fire. Ah, your face freezes in horror, Revigny!"

"You—you couldn't! You—"

The words came through a mask of icy white. Diaz barked in Apache and two braves stepped up to Denise.

"Tell him nothing, *mon pére*," she said clearly. "It is obvious they will do what they will do, whether you tell him or not."

As the Apache braves reached for Denise's arms, Finlay reached for something himself, something heavy and loaded, that lay beside him in the cleft. He flung it out, spinning, and it struck at Diaz' feet. Diaz stared at the saddle-bag that had whipped out of nowhere, paralyzed by surprise. His ring of braves stared with him, as rigid as statues.

"Revigny! Denise! This way!"

Finlay's shot took the Apache nearest Denise and knocked him backward. Denise and Revigny saw Finlay then, crouched in the cleft only yards away. Revigny caught his daughter around the waist and rushed her over the ground as Finlay fired again, and an Indian who was grabbing for the girl collapsed.

Then father and daughter were inside the cleft and Finlay was shoving the Apache's rifle he carried into Revigny's hands. Revigny leveled it on Diaz.

"I have you, Diaz!" he called.

"No!" burst out Finlay, and jerked the muzzle up. "I need Diaz!"

THE Spaniard was kneeling beside the saddle-bag, ripping it open and plunging his hands into its interior. They came out

with a bulky package wrapped in yellow chamois leather. Sheer greed lighted his face, and for the moment he was oblivious to danger.

"The treasure!" breathed Revigny. "Captain Finlay, you have thrown him the treasure!"

"Was that what was in the saddle-bag?" Finlay was shocked. "I didn't even figure what it might be. I threw it to divert Diaz's attention. To get you away and buy time. A pair of armed men can hold this cleft against all of Diaz's Apaches. Only two can enter it at either end abreast. We'll pile them up like dead coyotes!"

"Ah, you are right, *mon Capitan*. It was here I slept when Diaz attacked that time. But the treasure, my mission—"

"I have a mission to perform myself, Revigny," cut in Finlay. "That is to get you and Denise out. I'll sacrifice any treasure to do it."

"But—but—"

"Forget chasing rainbows," Finlay said harshly. "Face the situation we've got. I'm going to do a deal with Diaz."

"And how? He holds the odds."

"There's a card he gave me himself," Finlay said, and called loudly through the cleft, "Diaz, this is Captain Finlay from the fort. We're holed up in here, fully armed, and you can't get in to us. You hear me, Diaz?"

Diaz was hidden behind a rock and his braves also had taken cover at Finlay's surprise attack.

"I hear you," the White Apache called back.

"You've got the treasure. Take your Apaches and yourself out of here. We'll swap our lives against that loot of yours."

"*Si?*" taunted Diaz. "Do you forget that my braves might want revenge on you, and that I want it myself on Revigny? We can starve you out without a loss."

"You cannot! The fort is on the way."

"And how did you notify your colonel that we are here in this valley? You are alone and half-stripped, you followed us all by yourself, hot on our trail. The fort is on the way—ha, ha! That is your Yankee bluff, Captain Finlay. The fort has no way of knowing of your plight."

Finlay made no answer. Beside him Revigny jutted his rifle forward.

"It was a good bluff, Captain," the Frenchman said. "But it failed. We are trapped. Diaz has all three of us."

"We can still try. Diaz, will you let the girl go under a flag of truce if Revigny and I surrender?"

"No, you fool! It is ten years since I have seen a white woman."

"You filthy hound!" panted Revigny, and his eyes flared. "Cover me, *mon Capitan*. In one short rush I can reach the rock behind which that dog crouches."

Finlay grabbed Revigny by the arm as the Frenchman tried to break past him into the open. Out there in the pale light of predawn, creaping down from the nearby cliff wall, black shadows were moving.

"No!" shouted Finlay. "They're charging! Diaz has waved them in. Shoot, Revigny, shoot!"

In a rush a full twenty Apaches bounded forward. Colt and rifle crashed together.

"Back, Revigny, back!" Finlay yelled. "Denise, watch the other entrance."

Smoke roiled blindingly in the narrow cleft; the reports were deafening. The charge drew to a point in the narrow entrance, and Apaches blocked it from wall to wall. Into the surge of copper-brown bodies Captain Finlay shot and shot again, and *Capitan* Revigny rattled through his magazine.

WHEN the smoke blew away, in front of them, feet high, lay a breastwork of riddled Apaches who twitched and died slowly.

"The more you send, the higher you build our fort, Diaz!" yelled Finlay.

"Do you think you can hold out forever?"

The Indians' screeching rose wildly and Finlay could hear Diaz stilling them with orders in Apache. A tense silence fell while the pale light strengthened. Staring over the rampart of dead savages Finlay could see only a short space in front of him where the fire was dying into embers. But, strangely, the smell of smoke seemed to be increasing. When a copper arm came around the edge of the cleft with the remainder of a body hidden Kent Finlay knew stark horror.

The blazing branch that was flung into the cleft struck Finlay's body and he hurled it off. Another fiery branch came, a third, and a fourth. Now Apaches on both sides of the entrance were throwing brands into the cleft. Finlay and Revigny were stamping desperately on the improvised torches but they couldn't put out more than a few. Choking, gasping, eyes running tears and almost sightless, they could only struggle on until soffocation came.

"Why should I charge again, Yankee?" shouted Diaz. "In minutes you will all be unconscious."

"Mon pére!" Denise's voice rose in alarm.

Revigny reeled toward the other entrance and his rifle cracked. Finlay turned his head for a look. He could barely see, but what he could make out was enough. The Apaches were bottling the cleft in his rear with smoke and fire.

"They have reinforcements coming!" Denise called. "They are moving through the mesquite at the valley entrance. I can see it shaking."

"Does it matter?" said Revigny. "This smoke has doomed us, *mon Capitan.* I shall take care of my daughter, then let the two of us break into the open, and this time I am going for Diaz."

"This time I'll go with you," Finlay said grimly. All hope was gone now.

They had started up the crevice when Diaz's voice carried to them:

"Had enough, Finlay? Had enough, Revigny? I am ordering my Apaches in."

"Denise!" Revigny said hoarsely. In the welter of smoke he raised his rifle. "Denise, turn around and face me. Diaz will not get you, *cherie.*"

Finlay leaned against the wall, closing his eyes, as utter anguish engulfed him. Dimly he was aware that Denise was crying out again, but now it was in a tone of incredulous joy:

"They're not Apaches coming! They are blue uniforms! They are into the valley!"

VII

HIGH and clear, shrilled the bugle in the command of "Open Fire!" The heavy roar of Army carbines swelled between the walls of the valley and a long, steady rattle sounded as though from heights, echoed by frantic Apache screeches.

Finlay stumbled forward and broke out of the smoke-filled crevice behind Denise and Revigny. Through the veil of black powder-smoke that stretched across the valley's lower end the line of skirmishers that had stopped the fire was running forward. They halted and let go again. Behind them a second line appeared at the double, and more troopers were rimming the top of the thirty-foot rock walls and advancing over them fast.

A tall figure strode in front of the attack.

"Two troops, with Colonel Lawrence leading!" Finlay called jubilantly. "The fort's in!"

"Your Yankee bluff then, it was not the bluff!" the Frenchman said hoarsely.

And Finlay admitted, "I didn't know whether it was or not. I just tried it. . . . Up this rock and out of the line of fire, Revigny."

Smoke was still pouring from the crevice as they scaled the slanting slope of the pyramidal rock and sheltered under its crest. Shocked by the deadly fire moving down upon them the Apaches were breaking. A mass of them raced instinctively for the horse herd, only to waver as realization came that, mounted, they still couldn't get out of the valley. As they hesitated the troopers' carbine fire struck them down. Then they were dodging, flinging themselves under cover, firing back spasmodically, their organization gone.

"The fort's smashed their main force," said Finlay. "Now for Diaz."

He crept the last few feet up the slope of rock and peered over. A cluster of Apaches remained between the rock and the valley wall, crouching behind boulders, but there was no sign of Diaz.

"Gone!" groaned Revigny. "Gone with the treasure! He has found a way out. No, no, *Capitan,* look! The chimney!"

Clear in the broad light the chimney in the rock wall and a powerful figure going up it, using whatever hand and footholds the rock offered were silhouetted. Diaz was

scaling fast and as Finlay watched he pulled himself in a last effort to the flat rimrock, high above the ground. He raised himself erect.

"Diaz!" called Revigny, rifle trained. "I have you!"

The hammer of Revigny's rifle fell on an empty clicking. "Shot out! Fire, *Capitan*, fire!"

Cylinder flung open and cartridges in his hand Finlay cursed. "Reloading, Revigny."

"Then he gets away! And the treasure, he has it wrapped about his neck to free his hands!"

Across the spread of the valley the molten glow of dawn reached and struck full on the breast of Diaz. Where it struck a blinding brilliance erupted. It looked to Finlay as though Ditz's chest was a mass of blazing, coruscated fire. Diaz looked down on the pyramidal rock.

"*Adios*, Revigny, you fool! I go, never to return. Take care of my savages. Ha, ha!" His scornful laugh rang out.

"Apaches!" Finlay's shout rose in Spanish as he pointed to the lone barbaric figure on the rock wall. "There goes your god! Leaving you to your destruction in your hour of defeat. Fleeing from you when you need his strength the most. Do you let him go?"

A swift whistling sound split the air, Diaz's laugh of triumph dying abruptly as an arrow struck and stood out a foot behind his pierced neck. For an instant the force of the blow seemed to jerk him upright, then his body sagged and toppled out over the rimrock into mid-air. Spinning and flashing it fell and struck earth with a muted crash.

"You turned his Apaches on him!" said Revigny incredulously. "They killed him!"

"Just another last-minute gamble that paid off. Those Apaches are pure savages. I figured they'd kill their god rather than let him leave them in the lurch. There goes the war. Let's join the winners."

HE SLIPPED down the face of the rock and onto the flat. Troopers had poured about both sides of the rock and Apaches stood in sullen surrender with their hands in the air. Out in the valley the other troops had herded up the rest of the braves.

"Thanks, Colonel Lawrence," said Kent Finlay. "You made it just in time. It seems Captain Revigny got his ambush, after all."

Colonel Lawrence, a post commander who fought along with his men, was shoving his Colt back into holster. Sergeant Hughes, grinning, bulked beside him.

"We came fast, Finlay," Lawrence told them. "The first report from the fort sentries gave it you had been captured along with Revigny and his daughter, and I turned the troops out pronto. When we struck your tunic and shirt hung up like a scarecrow on that cactus with the writing on your field message book sticking out of a pocket telling where they were being taken, things went easier. We had Sergeant Hughes with us."

"I hoped you would, sir. Hughes could give you a plan for attack, with his knowledge of this valley."

"I did that," said the sergeant. "I even licked a pencil and drew a map."

"That dead Apache you left at the entrance told us more, and then the firing came." Lawrence bowed to Denise. "I am happy to see you safe, Miss Revigny. But where is your father?"

"I am here, *mon Colonel.*" Revigny was advancing from the wall, the strapped saddle-bag over his arm. "I have to report that at last my mission is performed, my promise is safely on the way to fulfillment. To you as a colonel and an accredited representative of the United States Government I hand this treasure."

He held out the saddle-bag.

"For forwarding to its rightful owner, *mon Colonel*, through the proper channels. I suggest that you send it with your report to your Department Headquarters who will pass it on to Washington. There the War Department will give it to the State Department who will in turn hand it to the Belgian *Chargé d'Affaires.*"

"State Department? Belgian *Chargé d'Affaires?*" Wonderingly Colonel Lawrence weighed the saddle-bag in his hand.

"The Belgian *Chargé* will send it to Brussels, *mon Colonel.* Outside Brussels is an ancient chateau where, her mind shattered by the tragedy of her lost imperial husband and

her lost empire, there now lives the Empress Carlotta of Mexico. In that saddle-bag reposes the priceless diamond necklace which Maximilian gave her for her coronation as empress. It is worth an untold fortune."

"Well, I'll be . . . Yes, yes, but Emperor Maximilian being shot by the firing squad of Juarez's revolutionists and the Empress Carlotta's plight is past history, and history marches fast out here. But you—"

"I was captain of their palace guard. When the empire tottered the Empress Carlotta fled to the coast and shipped to Europe to beg military aid from Napoleon III of France and Emperor Franz Josef of Austria-Hungary from whose royal house of Hapsburg Maximilian sprang. But they turned deaf ears. When Maximilian was slain the tragedy deranged her mind. In the last days of the falling empire the Empress Carlotta entrusted me with the safety of her coronation necklace and other palace valuables and I headed north for the Border at her command. The White Apache, a Spanish renegade officer of the guard named Diaz, followed me to kill us all and take the necklace I have just stripped from his body. But that is a long story which will wait until later. You accept the trust of the necklace, *mon Colonel?"*

"I accept it," Colonel Lawrance said gravely. "It will go through. But you, Captain Revigny—why don't you take it overseas yourself?"

"I have seen the ruin of an empire, *mon Colonel.* I do not wish to see the ruin of a loved empress. It is my hope that the sight of this necklace may restore her to sanity. Your Government takes over the last stage of my mission and I stay here on your frontier in my adopted country. Does it take long to become a United States citizen?"

"In your case, Captain Revigny, it should take a very short time. We can use a citizen like you out here. There's a United States circuit judge makes his route through here and he ought to be holding court in the railhead town inside a month. I'd certainly be glad to—"

FINLAY didn't hear the rest. Unconsciously he had taken Denise by the arm and led her out of earshot behind the pyramidal rock. A glow lighted her face; she was radiant.

"Denise," he said. "I—"

He paused.

"Yes?" Soft encouragement lilted in her voice. "It's nice to know that I'll be an American citizen with my father in a month."

"You can be one before nightfall if you want to," he said.

"I'd like that even better." She smiled. "But how?"

"Marriage to an American makes a woman born abroad an American citizen automatically. Colonel Lawrence has the authority to perform a civil wedding ceremony in the post, lacking a chaplain." The words seemed to come out in a rush by themselves. "Things go fast out here. Denise, can you give me an answer?"

"I know things go fast out here. But I'd have to have time to think a thing like that over. At least—" she smiled again—"five seconds."

And he had her in his arms.

Follow the Action-Packed Adventures of Lone Wolf Ranger Jim Hatfield in TEXAS RANGERS—25c at All Stands!

"Come on back, Henry!"

Honorary Sheriff

By ROBERT VIRGIL

HENRY LOGAN'S sensitive fingers found a rough spot on the toy gun he was making and with a deft flick of his knife, he trimmed it out of existence. He sat in his usual place at the corner of the house where the sun stayed most of the afternoon.

Finally he sighed and placed the toy on the bench at his side. It would wait there for the first eager-voiced child who passed, as they did every day, shouting:

"Done any whittling today, Sheriff?"

Everybody still called him that, even after five years. In fact, they'd never taken his badge away—a kind gesture, leaving him the tarnished symbol of the office he had held so long, but an empty one, nevertheless.

Five years was a long time in a man's memory, but it seemed that his nostrils still breathed the dust-furred air of that night. The dust had come from the trail herd that had stopped just out of town a ways. It was up from Texas, driven by a man named

Henry Logan, ex-lawman, had one last gunman to face . . .

Cass Meade and heading for the railroads further north.

The cowboys had been plenty thirsty, but there'd been no trouble until someone had come running to the little log jail yelling that Meade had just killed a man over in the Silver Spur.

A lot of strangers had been in the place when Henry had stepped into the saloon. He'd wondered which one was Meade and had tried to watch them all.

"Who's Meade?"

The flaming blast of a sixgun had been his answer and he had reeled back through the batwings. He could remember how the rough lumber in the saloon's porch had felt against his face. Blackness then. They told him later that Cass Meade had ridden out, laughing.

The people had hemmed and hawed about what they had to do, but finally they'd appointed a man to fill Henry's place. They'd left him his badge, though.

He raised a finger that was callused from a whittling knife and smoothed his thick mustache. His old crony, Bill Trowbridge, had come an hour ago with the news that the little prairie town was without a lawman again.

And Meade was back with another herd.

There was still the murder charge against him, and Henry's successor had tried to make the arrest this morning. He'd wound up down at the local undertaker's.

BILL had sounded worried. "Meade's hanging out down at the Silver Spur, acting pretty crusty. There'll be more killin's my guess, unless a bunch of us—"

He'd stopped talking abruptly and Henry had known he wasn't included in any action the townspeople might take against the deadly Texan. That rankled plenty deep, but he'd gone on whittling, not letting it show.

Bill's saddle had squeaked its newness when he had ridden off. That was when the plan began to form in Henry's mind. It might work, he told himself. A man learned a lot in five years. There wasn't anything to be lost—and if he won it would be an achievement that a man could live with.

Anyway, he owed the people something for all their generous tom-foolery; always bringing things by, and even the youngsters coming to chop wood, then refusing the dimes he offered them.

He stood up with his lean body bent in a tense crouch, and his hand made a practice sweep upward from his weaponless hip. He shook his head. A sixgun wouldn't do, but a shotgun would. He would allow himself that much. He would use the double-barreled twelve-gauge that stood ready in his bedroom.

With calm assurance, he moved into the house. His wife was singing a hymn in the kitchen above the clatter of the cook pots and pans. She wouldn't know he was gone. There'd be no worry about him not coming back. If he failed, she would find it out sudden and sure. That was the way things should be, instead of hanging on like they had been.

He hesitated for a moment after he took the shotgun from the closet then, chuckling, moved to the bureau to rummage for the badge. He pinned it on his shirt where the once familiar weight pressed lightly against his chest.

Ain't the badge makes a lawman, he thought, rubbing his fingers across the smooth metal, but maybe I got some of that other left, too.

Outside, he settled the shotgun into the crook of his arm and began to stroll along the walk toward the Silver Spur. The town stirred and lived around him. When a man grew up in a small place he knew every intimate detail of it, felt its warmth and friendliness. That was why he had to do this.

While he paused at a side street to let an empty wagon rattle past, he heard hasty footsteps pounding behind him. It was Bill Trowbridge.

"Henry, you ornery fool, what do you recken to do with that scattergun?"

"Going after a man, Bill." He said it calmly but inside he felt the thrill that came with desperate intent. It had been a long time.

"You're crazy! He'll kill you!"

Henry didn't slow his steps. He could hear the discordant jangling of the Silver

Spur's old piano. It wasn't far now.

"I got it to do, Bill."

Bill grabbed his arm and tried to pull him back.

"Come on back, Henry!"

He jerked himself free. "Don't try to stop me! Bill, you're my friend—you know I got to do it."

He walked on and heard Bill following him.

"All right," his friend said anxiously. "We'll take him. You and me, Henry, like when we was kids. I'll side you. That's fair enough.

"No!"

They went on in silence. Henry climbed the steps in front of the saloon and halted on the porch. The man he wanted was inside.

He wondered at the lack of fear he felt. There was just the contentment of knowing that he was needed.

He stepped through the batwings into the noise-crowded interior and walked slowly toward the bar.

"That man's got a shotgun!"

It was a clipped Eastern voice that had shouted, probably a drummer, Henry reasoned. That fellow will have a tale to take back with him.

He put his back solidly against the bar and breathed deeply of the scent of beer and tobacco and men. His words lashed across the dance hall.

"Stand away from Cass Meade!"

CHAIRS and boots scraped in the center of the room, then they receded until a man's heavy breathing rasped loudly, like an animal at bay. That man couldn't hide his fear.

"What are you up to?" His voice held fear, too.

"I'm Henry Logan. Remember—five years ago?"

The Texan demanded, "You looking to get even?"

Henry shook his head. It would be a waste of time trying to explain that justice wasn't balanced with revenge. It was a reason for living that he had to have from Cass Meade.

"You're a fool, Logan! You ain't no law."

Henry's thumb clicked against the badge.

"They never took it off me, Meade. I took it off myself because I didn't want to wear it for just a decoration. Now I've put it back on for awhile." He nodded toward the door and felt the silence in the place grow more intense. "Jail's just down the street, Meade—so's the undertaker's. How do you want it?"

Meade's chair creaked as he stood up, and the hammers of Henry's shotgun clicked loudly.

Along the bar, men moved noisily.

"Stand quiet!" Henry Logan's voice snapped them into tense stillness.

Meade's breathing came harsher and faster. Suddenly he bellowed aloud all of the fear and desperation that was in him, and his palm slapped against the butt of his six-gun. The room was filled with a resounding roar that vibrated and rolled in Henry's brain.

A splash of pain spread from his ear as boots thudded across the floor.

"He's clear, Henry!" It was Bill's voice.

THE twin muzzles of the shotgun swung around, searching, and blasted into the room. Chairs and tables crashed under the weight of the Texan's body.

"He's killed him!" That was the Easterner again, his voice was shrill with hysteira. "That shotgun—" He broke off with a sick moan.

Henry tucked the gun under his arm and paced through the room, daubing at his ear with a handkerchief. He stopped outside to unpin the badge from his shirt. It seemed to have a pulsating warmth to it that beat against his palm before he dropped it into his pocket.

"That was murder!" From inside the Easterner's voice sounded angry now. "All this poor man had was a pistol—against a shotgun!"

Henry smiled as he heard Bill Trowbridge answer him.

"He had more than a pistol, stranger. He had a pair of eyes, too. Henry Logan's been blind as a bat for five years."

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31P

When Crooked Trails Cross

A Novel
by WALT COBURN

No one knew better than Ambrose Loveless how thin was the line between good and bad, yet the law would call the lovely redhead's father guilty

THE Crown Land and Livestock Company Limited, a Scotch-British syndicate, had big ranches in Texas, South Dakota, Wyoming and Montana, and unlimited acres of pampas range in the Argentine, South America.

The Crown was shrewd enough to put a real cowman in as general manager of each big cattle ranch. A Texan to ramrod the Texas Crown outfit. A native of the Black Hills to ramrod the South Dakota spread. A Cheyenne cowman to run the Wyoming ranch. Lem Brewster from

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Wolf Point, Montana, was ramrodding the Montana outfit.

Lem Brewster had his roundup camped near the Larb Hills when a stranger rode up. It was just past sundown when the cocktail guard was going out to relieve the men on day herd, and the cowpunchers were roping their night horses.

The stranger was riding a Crown horse and had his tarp-covered bedpack on another gelding in the same brand.

"The one and only notorious Ambrose Loveless." Chalk Metcalf spoke to Lem Brewster as the two men led their night horses out of the rope corral. "Trouble-shooter for the Crown."

Chalk Metcalf had been trail boss of the last drive of Texas longhorns the Crown had trailed north to Montana. Chalk had either got his orders to stay here, or he'd made up his own mind to winter in Montana.

Every man in the outfit was watching Ambrose Loveless as he rode up. They had overheard Chalk tell Lem Brewster who the stranger was. Loveless was a man to attract attention. A hawk-beaked, lean-jawed six-footer who sat his saddle with his weight in his left stirrup, with straight coarse black hair that he wore a little too long. A pair of pale gray, yellow-flecked eyes, cold and cruel. A range dude to judge him by his clothes and fancy rig.

He had an arrogant manner that made other men dislike him on sight. But on most women it had an opposite reaction. Women, the kind of women Ambrose Loveless was apt to know, were fascinated by that same high-chinned arrogance, the handsome, dangerous cruelty of eyes that looked from under black brows, the thin-lipped smile that held a contemptuous twist.

Every man who had ever worked for the Crown knew Ambrose Loveless by reputation. They knew that for all his dude clothes and well-kept hide, this same Loveless was one of the best all-around cowhands in any man's country.

NO MAN was better posted on brands, and he could read a worked brand on sight. He had built up a rep as a gun-fighter. Somewhere in his youth he had acquired a better than average education and with it a polish that most likely was bred in him. Ambrose Loveless had to be all that, and more, to hold down his highly paid job.

He moved from one Crown outfit to the next, staying with each one long enough to detect any shady deals or underhanded cattle rustling. He was as shrewd a judge of men as he was of horses and cattle. If any of the Crown ranches failed to show a yearly profit, it was his job to find out whether open and flagrant crookedness was going on, or there was weakness on the part of the general manager and ramrod.

In short, Ambrose Loveless had something of a range detective's job, without the benefit of a law badge. He drew down big pay for seeing to it that the laws of the Crown Land and Livestock Company were obeyed. The laws of the United States, or the particular state or territorial laws were secondary. Loveless tossed them carelessly into the discard and was apt to break a few in the performance of his duty to the Crown. His saddle carbine and the ivory-handled six-shooter he packed were his only backing. In a tight Ambrose Loveless was a law unto himself.

For that, and for other reasons he was feared and hated.

As he rode up he looked down from his saddle at Lem Brewster and Chalk Metcalf.

"Long time no see, Loveless," Chalk said, grinning uncertainly.

Chalk was a heavy-shouldered six-foot man with a shock of hair the color of new rope, with a splayed nose and wide mouth. One eye had been badly gouged and blinded so that it showed a milky white set in a scarred socket. Dirty yellow whiskers a week old covered the lower part of his face. He looked slovenly in a shapeless old hat, his shirt tail out and his levis shoved into the tops of rusty boots.

"I was told I'd find you here, Chalk."

Loveless stepped down. He made no offer to shake hands, and Chalk had both his hands carefully occupied.

"This the wagon boss, Lem Brewster, standing right alongside me." Then Chalk

added quickly, "Don't offer to shake hands, Lem. Loveless don't believe in handshaking."

Lem Brewster was a round-shouldered, bow-legged amn with thinning grizzled hair and a carelessly clipped mustache. There was a slow friendly grin on his weathered face and in his squinted, faded blue eyes.

"I've heard tell of Ambrose Loveless." Lem Brewster had a slow way of talking. His old hat was pushed back to show the white of his forehead above the weathered face. He was looking Loveless over with a sort of mild curiosity.

Ambrose Loveless took a long official envelope from his pocket and, stepping around Chalk, handed it to Brewster. It bore the name and brand of the Crown Land and Livestock Company. Lem Brewster held it in both hands as though he deaded to slit the sealed flap, as though he were expecting the enclosed letter to contain bad news. Then he slid a blunt forefinger under the flap and handed the letter to Chalk with an awkward grin.

"You read 'er to me, Chalk. I never could puzzle out them double-barreled words."

Chalk read slowly, his voice harsh and rasping. Then he handed the letter back to Lem Brewster and saw the color slowly drain from Lem's weathered face. In those few moments, Lem Brewster seemed to age years. His hands were a little unsteady as he put the letter into the pocket of his shabby, buttonless vest. He took out of the small vest pocket his tally book and handed it to Loveless as though he were parting with the most precious thing in his life.

"It's all yours, mister."

LEM BREWSTER'S voice had a choked-up sound. He walked over to where the cowpunchers and reps were.

"From here on," he told them, "you'll be taking your further orders from Ambrose Loveless." Then he turned and headed for his horse.

"You'll still handle the beef herd, Brewster," said Loveless. "I understand you're the best beef man in the country."

Lem Brewster had turned his back and started to saddle his horse. Loveless jerked off his own saddle and pulled the diamond hitch loose from the bed horse.

"You've been on this Montana range long enough to know the country, Chalk." Loveless spoke in a flat-toned voice. "I'm counting on you to show me the range." Loveless said it loud enough to be overheard by Brewster.

The habitual grin was wiped off Chalk's face. His one good eye, cold blue-gray, looked at the other man.

"That depends, Loveless," he said slowly. Then Chalk waited until Lem Brewster stepped up on his horse and headed at a shuffling walk toward the beef herd.

"From where I'm standing, it looks like you took the ramrod job away from that old feller," Chalk said bluntly. "That was a blamed cold-blooded thing you just did. You nigh downed that old-timer."

"You've worked for Crown long enough to know I'm taking my orders from headquarters," said Loveless.

"You won't find no snake tracks on Lem Brewster's trail," Chalk said flatly.

"If he didn't leave snake tracks—" Loveless smiled thinly—"I won't find any."

He unbuckled his chaps and dropped them on his saddle. Chalk watched him tie down his gun holster with a buckskin string, low on his right thigh. When he lifted his head there was a faint mocking smile on his thin lips.

"If you had tied up the job you was supposed to do, Chalk, when the Crown gave you orders to stay in Montana, I wouldn't be here."

"What are you driving at, Loveless?"

Ambrose Loveless squatted on spurred boot heels and motioned Chalk down with him. He flattened the loose dirt with the palm of his hand and marked the Crown brand in the dirt, using a short stick. Next he erased the two sides and the base of the Crown.

"That's what becomes of what was hair-branded on the critter's hide." Loveless held Chalk's one-eyed stare for a long moment, until Chalk nodded his reluctant confirmation.

"But it would take mighty slick brand work," Chalk muttered.

"Yes." Ambrose Loveless was acting now for all the world like a patient schoolmaster with a backward pupil. "Clyde Mettler is what you might call a master among the brand artists."

Chalk lifted his head quickly. His one eye singled out a man who was squatted on his heels among half a dozen cowhands who were roasting ribs stuck on branding irons, grouped around an open fire.

"That's Clyde Mettler yonder in the black hat. He's repping for the Larb Hills Pool."

Loveless looked at Clyde Mettler, a short heavy-set man with sandy hair and a lot of freckles. Then he looked down, and Chalk watched him convert the upper part of the Crown brand into a neat Double Diamond.

CHALK studied the brand for a long moment. When he looked up, Loveless erased it with the heel of his hand.

"Clyde sold his Double Diamond outfit in the Larb Hills to a fellow from Oregon named Wiley Clark," Chalk said. "Wiley's been buying up every likely looking brood mare in the country. He bought a Morgan stud from the Government. He's going into the horse business and spends all his time at the home ranch handling his colts. He can take a green bronc and in two months' time turn him into a well broke cow-horse that you can cut cattle with or rope off. Mettler's supposed to be gathering the remnant cattle in the Double Diamond iron and he's repping for half a dozen other irons located around the Larb Hills."

Chalk spoke in a guarded tone, and while he was talking he kept watching Clyde Mettler, who had a long meaty beef rib laid across a half-diamond stamp iron and was watching the meat sizzle above the red coals.

"The Crown sent Clyde Mettler his last warning over a year ago." Ambrose Loveless rolled a cigarette and pulled a match head across the buckskin-foxed seat of his woolen California pants. "To gather what cattle he had in the Double Diamond and discontinue the use of that brand."

"That's news to me." Chalk's voice was saw-edged with annoyance.

"The Crown wrote you a letter, telling you to keep an eye on Mettler. To say nothing to Lem Brewster, and to mail your report at the end of the six months to headquarters."

"I never got the letter, Loveless. When the ranch mail comes once a week, the bookkeeper leaves it on the bunkhouse table for the boys to help themselves. I never got any letters, so I never bothered looking. Anybody could have picked up a letter that came in my name."

"When the Crown failed to get your report, they sent me." Ambrose Loveless smiled thinly. "I was to use my own judgment about taking you into my confidence."

Ambrose Loveless stood up and hitched up his gun-belt, then headed for the mess tent. The cowhands that circled the open campfire stared at him. They all knew him by reputation.

Loveless was used to being stared at. He'd grown calloused to the wary, unfriendly coldness in the eyes of other men. That was how he wanted it. That was partly why he never shook hands with any man. He had a code of his own. To grip a man's hand was a gesture of friendship, and he told himself he could not afford a single friend that he might later be forced to arrest. It was bad enough to be a man-hunter, but his code forbade him to be a hypocrite about it.

Ambrose Loveless had just come back from the Argentine Crown, and the jingle of the big-roweled South American spurs he'd gotten down there sounded a metallic taunt with each swaggering step. Chalk's one eye glinted with a reluctant admiration for this man who held the world at arm's length away from him.

If any man on earth could ever know about Ambrose Loveless, Chalk Metcalf knew him. Years before they had ever heard of Crown they had handled a lot of wet cattle together, and taken their chances below the Mexican line on this side of the Border. Later, they had quit handling wet cattle and had gone to work for the Crown outfit in Texas. Chalk Metcalf had been trail boss and Am-

brose Loveless had got the trouble-shooter job he'd asked for.

There was a restless streak in the heart of Ambrose Loveless that required excitement and danger. He pointed out to the Crown outfit that they needed a man to travel from one outfit to the next to do the dangerous, unpleasant work of cleaning up anything that looked crooked, and they hired him at his own high-priced salary. He soon became the most valued man on the Crown pay-roll.

FROM time to time Chalk had shared a lot of danger with Ambrose Loveless, and more than once had made some cautious overture toward friendliness. But each time the cold look in the eyes of Loveless had discouraged any sign of comradeship.

Other men earning big wages or making good money trading, talked about retiring when they'd made their pile, about marrying and settling down on their outfits, or perhaps buying a saloon. Ambrose Loveless never talked like that. If he had any dreams of what he wanted for a future, he kept them to himself, perhaps locked up with bitter memories.

No one had ever heard him mention where he had come from or who his family was, or anything about his boyhood or youth. Loveless never laughed, and few ever saw a smile melt the hardness of his eyes.

II

ON EARLY morning circle, Chalk rode in the lead alongside the new wagon boss. Chalk kept thinking about what had happened back at camp when they had roped out their circle horses before dawn.

"There ain't any extra string of horses," Lem Brewster had told Loveless. "I been using 'em up, one at a time, when one of the boys would lame a horse. You're the wagon boss. I'm staking you to my string of horses, Loveless."

"My only orders, Brewster, were to take over your job," said Loveless. "You keep your horses."

The light had been too dim to see the look that had come into Lem Brewster's eyes. It had been gratitude, with something like admiration for the trouble-shooter.

"You can't ramrod the outfit afoot," he'd said. "We can take one horse from each Crown cowpuncher's string."

"There's the rough string," Chalk had grinned, meaning it for a josh. "The bronc rider broke a leg last week and Lem sent him to town in the bed wagon."

"The rough string will do," Ambrose Loveless had said. He'd made it sound casual, careless.

Chalk had seen Loveless ride broncs before, but none of the rest had, and in the first dim gray light of dawn they swapped meaningful, sly grins of anticipation.

Chalk was secretly proud of the ride Ambrose Loveless had put up on a bronc from the rough string. Lem Brewster and the Crown cowhands and the reps agreed it was one of the prettiest, cleanest rides they had ever seen. But the eyes of Clyde Mettler had been green winter ice, and the hard-lipped grin had stayed frozen on his face. It had been something in the way of a minor conquest for Ambrose Loveless. Every man in the outfit had to respect him.

"Lead this circle straight across Sun Prairie and as far as the Larb Hills as you can without setting the men afoot, Chalk," Loveless had said as he'd wiped the sweat off his face with his shirt sleeve.

"Lem Brewster wasn't planning on working the Larb Hills country till next week." Chalk had been wondering if the pitching bronc had jarred the brains inside Ambrose Loveless' skull.

"Lem Breewster isn't running the outfit any more. We're going to work what part of the Larb Hills we can in one day. I want the outfit camped on yonder side of Sun Prairie by noon. We'll drop the cattle we gather on the morning circle onto the holdup grounds below Stinking Springs on feed and water. Then change horses and make a second circle after noon. We'd ought to get the second drive to the holdup grounds and throwed in with the morning's drive by dark."

"Kinda surprise party on them Larb Hills ranchers," said Chalk. "Clyde Mettler ain't going to like it one bit."

"I'm not running the Crown roundup to please Mettler," explained Loveless. "This morning's circle should fetch us close to Wiley Clark's Double Diamond Ranch and the box canyon known as the Double Diamond Trap."

"I'm commencing to catch on." Chalk had again grinned.

"Then grab a tail-holt and drop two of the Crown cowhands off and tell 'em confidential. No need in the others knowing too much."

Chalk had sent two men to help load the camp wagons and told Lem Brewster to graze his day herd across Sun Prairie to the holdup grounds at Stinking Springs. He dropped off the men in pairs with instructions to gather everything they found, slick-eared or sleeper-marked, and to be at the holdup ground by noon.

Loveless and Chalk kept Clyde Mettler with them after all the other cowhands and the reps had been scattered in pairs. Mettler's face had a sullen look and his eyes were wary, suspicious.

THE three of them picked up about a hundred head on the outside circle. Loveless was within sight of the Double Diamond home ranch when he turned back.

"We can get a change of horses at the Double Diamond." Clyde Mettler tried to make it sound like a careless invitation.

"We'll ride the ones we're forking, Mettler," Loveless said curtly. "If your horse plays out, get off and lead him."

"Like as not Wiley Clark will want to throw in with us." Clyde Mettler's scowl deepened. "While we're working his Double Diamond range. Brewster was to let him know—"

"Brewster ain't running the wagon. I'm full-handed for Larb Hills reps as it is."

"I got a mind to cut my string." Clyde Mettler's eyes looked dangerous.

"Better change your mind, Mettler, unless you feel like crowding your luck."

Clyde Mettler looked back at the Double Diamond Ranch but nobody was in sight along the log buildings or pole corrals. Then he rode off, stiff-backed on the saddle, as though expecting a bullet to hit him.

The sun was noon high when they dropped their cattle drive into the holdup herd. Loveless stood high in his stirrups and waved his hat in a wide circle.

"Turn 'em loose!" He lifted his voice to a shout above the bawling of cattle that rose from the sluggish dust pall.

They wolfed the noon grub at the camp at Stinking Springs. Loveless told the outfit to catch their top circle horses.

"It's a forty-mile circle and we'll be lucky to get back to camp by moonrise."

But Loveless never dropped a man off circle till they reached the Double Diamond Ranch.

"Looks like nobody's home." Loveless was watching the worried dread in the eyes of Clyde Mettler whose face was a dirty yellow.

"Where's them colts, Chalk, you claimed kept Wiley Clark nailed down here at his home ranch?"

The corrals were empty and the pole gates open. No horses were tied up in the log barn. There were only some brood mares with colts too young to be weaned, in the lower pasture, and broken saddle horses in the upper pasture near the barn. There was a Morgan stud with the mare bunch in the far pasture.

"Like as not Wiley's off somewhere a-girling." Clyde Mettler's voice sounded sullen. "Chances are you'll find him right now at the Sun Prairie schoolhouse, helping the schoolmarm eat her lunch."

"Taking her a red apple, like as not." Loveless grinned thinly. "We might find him at the Double Diamond Trap," he added. "Take us to it, Chalk."

There was one narrow trail that dropped off the scrub pine ridge into the deep box canyon. Loveless sent Clyde Mettler down ahead and rode behind him with his gun in his hand. He left Chalk and a couple of Crown cowpunchers to stand guard at the head of the trail.

"Stop anybody from coming down. Stop anybody that comes up if I ain't along."

A ten-wire fence was stretched along the narrow entrance to the box canyon. A chain and padlock closed the pole gate. Loveless told Clyde Mettler to unlock the gate or

shoot away the padlock. When Mettler reached for his six-shooter he found himself covered by the gun in Ambrose Loveless' right hand.

"In case you get tempted, Mettler."

Clyde Mettler shot away the padlock. The noise made by the .45 sounded cannon-loud and sent echoes crashing back and forth between the high rocky walls of the canyon.

LOVELESS and his cowhands rode through.

"Prop the gate open. We're emptying what's in the cattle trap."

They found what Loveless was looking for. They counted fifty-five head of cattle through the gateway, and the worked brands on their hides furnished enough evidence to send somebody to the penitentiary for a long time. It was the Crown brand neatly worked into a Double Diamond.

"I sold the Double Diamond to Wiley Clark," Clyde Mettler sneered. "You ain't got a single thing on me, Loveless."

"Unless Wiley Clark sings," Loveless said.

They strung the cattle out and headed them up the steep trail. Loveless and Clyde Mettler brought up the drags, and Loveless motioned with his gun for Mettler to climb the trail ahead of him.

It was dark when they dropped the little drive of cattle into the beef herd.

"Don't spill 'em," Loveless told Lem Brewster who had ridden up.

"Looks like them steers is too young to be shipped," said Brewster.

"The Double Diamond is closing out the iron, Brewster. Shipping everything from yearlings up. Gathering the remnants."

"Don't chouse up my beef," Lem Brewster growled. "No sense in getting the whole herd up on their feet to walk-bawl half the night. I got 'em."

"Take care you hold 'em."

Loveless and Chalk kept Clyde Mettler between them as they headed for camp.

"You try to rabbit," Loveless told him as they unsaddled and headed for the lighted mess tent, "somebody's going to cripple you."

"I ain't running from nothing, mister. I sold out to Wiley Clark. I'm only a hired hand repping for the Larb Hills Pool." There was a deparate look in Mettler's green eyes. "I'm waiting for Wiley Clark to show up." Mettler's voice was gritty.

"You might have spooked him plumb out of the country when you shot the padlock off the gate."

Clyde Mettler shrugged. "I'd hate to see any man go to the pen."

"I doubt if Wiley Clark will return the favor." Loveless watched the bloodshot green eyes darken with doubt.

"Wiley won't quit a man in a tight." Mettler was trying to convince himself now.

III

CLYDE METTLER slept that night with his bed on the ground between the beds of Ambrose Loveless and Chalk Metcalf. They were taking no chances on his trying to run off.

They worked Sun Prairie the following morning. Loveless dropped Chalk off with two Crown cowhands on the inside circle and gave orders to the two men to shoot Mettler if he tried for a getaway. He said it loud enough for every man in the outfit to hear him plainly.

Loveless dropped the circle riders off in pairs until only he and Chalk were left. They made no effort to gather cattle. They were headed up the long wide flat stretch called Sun Prairie when Loveless broke the silence.

"Clyde Mettler gave Wiley Clark a warning when he shot off the gate padlock. He wasn't hanging around the Double Diamond when we got there and he wasn't at the trap. Mettler ain't the only man that's handled a running iron on the hides of those cattle we fetched out of the trap yesterday."

"Meaning Wiley Clark?" Chalk grinned and shook his head.

"Why not, Chalk?"

"All Wiley knows is horses. All he does is fool around with them broncs."

"Why do you think he makes good cow horses outa them green broncs?"

Chalk's wide grin died out slowly. Then he shook his head and laughed.

"You never seen Wiley Clark. He's one of them harmless-looking fellers. He has all the earmarks of a tenderfoot. He shaves every morning and puts on a clean shirt. Wears gloves even in hot weather and keeps his boots polished. He was most likely off a-girling when we worked the trap yesterday evening. You sure got the wrong man if you figure he would dirty his lily-white hands with a running iron." Chalk pointed to what looked like a small settlement. "That's Sun Prairie. That's the schoolhouse half a mile off from the rest of the town, flying the flag."

"Where there's a schoolhouse—" Ambrose Loveless bared his white teeth in a grin—"there's bound to be a schoolmarm. Is she worth riding a few miles out of the way to see?"

"She's homely as hell. Dried-up old maid that wear's specs." Chalk spoke almost too quickly. "She's also the female postmaster."

"I'm expecting some mail." Ambrose Loveless lifted his horse to a long trot, headed in the direction of Sun Prairie.

Chalk wore a worried scowl as he overtook the new wagon boss.

"The schoolmarm—" Chalk's voice had a gritty sound—"is Lem Brewster's mammyless daughter Jessie. She thinks the sun rises and sets on her father. She ain't going to welcome no man that's taken his ramrod job away from him. Right now is a good time to give you warning. That red-headed girl has a temper to match her hair and them gray eyes of hers can sure freeze over quick."

"Could be that is why she wears specs to protect 'em." Loveless looked at Chalk. "Does she wear store teeth?"

"All right. You win. I was trying to protect you from yourself. You're supposed to be ramrodding the Crown roundup."

"All work and no play, Chalk, can get any man in a tiresome rut."

Jessie Brewster was herding her dozen or more school-children of all ages out of the schoolhouse for recess. She was standing in the doorway eating a red apple when Chalk and Ambrose rode up.

She was about five-feet-four and trimly built. She had on a soft gray dress and her coppery hair was coiled at the nape of the neck. She had a wide, generous full-lipped mouth and faint laugh creases. She was all of twenty years old, and over her soft gray eyes she had never worn a pair of spectacles. She waved the hand that held the apple and her smile was frank and friendly.

AMBROSE LOVELESS pulled off his hat with a sweeping gesture.

"I'm looking for Jessie Brewster. A dried-up homely old maid who wears specs." His voice had the hint of a chuckle.

"Most folks around here call me the schoolmarm. I'm Jessie Brewster, but I don't wear specs." A faint flush made her all the more attractive.

"It looks like somebody lied, and I owe you a profound apology," Loveless said. "I hate to bother you, but I'm expecting some mail."

"I can't tell you offhand if there's any mail for you, without knowing your name."

"Ambrose Loveless."

Loveless was close enough to watch the friendly bantering smile die on her lips and the softness of her eyes freeze over. She turned to look behind her into the log schoolroom.

"Is this the man you've been telling me about, Wiley?" she asked.

Wiley Clark appeared from somewhere inside and stood behind the girl, head and shoulders above her head. His face was freshly shaved and he had on a light gray tailored flannel shirt.

But Ambrose Loveless' eyes passed over the man's too-handsome looks and saw only his eyes that were a pale steely color, neither blue nor gray, and bleak as a winter sky. Loveless stared into those eyes for a long moment before he turned and looked at the girl, who stood tense, the hand that held the red apple so tight-gripped that the knuckles showed bone-white against the sun tanned soft skin.

"If there's mail for me at the post-office, I'll pick it up without bothering you." Loveless dropped his tied bridle reins and used his left hand to tip his hat.

Chalk noticed for the first time that Loveless' right hand was covering the ivory

handle of his six-shooter.

"The Crown roundup worked your Larb Hills range and the Double Diamond Trap yesterday, Clark. We'll start working the herd this afternoon. It might be a good idea for you to be there representing your Double Diamond brand." Loveless grinned thinly, and added, "Besides, Clyde Mettler is expecting you."

"I'm heading for the roundup," said Wiley Clark, "directly I finish my talk with Jessie Brewster that you interrupted."

Loveless reined his horse around and rode away at a running walk, Chalk alongside him. Loveless sat his horse with a saddle swagger that was the envy and admiration of Chalk Metcalf. But Chalk wasn't watching the way Loveless rode now.

"I got a look," said Chalk, "at Wiley Clark's eyes."

"You changed your mind about his being harmless?"

"You better not ever turn your back on him, Loveless. He might have a knife in his hand."

Chalk led the way into the general mercantile store that housed the post-office. A rear corner was partitioned off and rows of pigeon-holes were on one wall, lettered alphabetically. The door of the partitioned-off post-office stood open and was held in place by a keg of horseshoes. Bolts of gingham and muslin lay on the counter.

The storekeeper was the counterpart of Chalk's description of the schoolmarm. A flat-chested, drab-looking woman with steel-rimmed spectacles.

Chalk and Loveless tipped their hats, and Chalk asked for the Crown mail. The woman said to help themselves.

There were only a few mail-order catalogues and some periodicals for the Crown Ranch in the pigeon-hole marked C. The registry book lay closed on the desk. Loveless opened it and was looking inside when Jessie Brewster came in.

SHE unlocked and pulled open the top drawer of the desk and reached inside. Then she opened the drawer still further and peered inside.

"It isn't here," she said to Loveless. "I put a registered letter for you in the desk drawer. Now it's gone." Her eyes were deep-shadowed with dread.

"Was the drawer locked?" Loveless asked.

Jessie Brewster looked at him. "I locked it this morning before I left for school." Then she spoke to the woman who ran the store. "You had no business unlocking that drawer, Sarah."

"Wiley Clark came in," said the woman. "I was busy sweeping out and I loaned him my keys. He said he was expecting a registered package."

Jessie's face looked pale and her eyes were dark with worry as she closed and padlocked the door that partitioned off the post-office.

"Let's go outside." She led the way out the door and the two men followed.

"Did Wiley Clark tell you, ma'am—" Loveless dropped his voice to a low tone—"that I took Lem Brewster's ramrod job away from him?"

"Yes." Her voice was no more than a whisper.

"I was only following the orders the Crown handed me. Your father is still the beef boss and getting the same wages he got when he was ramrod."

"My father ramrodded that outfit long before the Crown bought it. In the deal that was made, the Crown agreed to keep him as ramrod. It's a dirty underhanded trick for the Crown to play on a good, honest man."

"Yes, ma'am," agreed Chalk, when Jessie looked at him. "That's what I told Loveless."

"Did Wiley Clark come over with you, lady?" Loveless asked quietly.

"No. He said he had to get out to the roundup right away and see my father." Her hands were clenched and her eyes were hard and bright with cold anger.

"Like a Pony Express rider—" Loveless grinned flatly—"carrying the mail."

"I declared a school holiday," said Jessie. "I'm riding out to the roundup to see my father."

"Lem Brewster will be happy to see you." Loveless turned to Chalk. "You might ride on to camp. Tell the cook to build a

son-of-a-gun in the sack for supper. You're ramrodding the outfit till I show up, Chalk. Tell the boys around the holdup to eat and change horses and commence working the herd. I'll get there as soon as I can make it."

Ambrose Loveless and Jessie Brewster rode along together for a mile or two before Loveless broke the tension of silence.

He kept watching the broken skyline of the Larb Hills but all the time he was looking off into the distance he was seeing the girl who rode alongside him. Jessie was the first girl he had ever seen wearing a pair of levi overalls, boots and stetson. She was a good rider and had a catch-rope on her saddle and rope marks on the saddle-horn.

"I'm about to break one of my own rules, lady." There was no trace of a smile on his face. "I'm going to deal you in on something. I always made a rule to keep my business strictly to myself, but I'm breaking my own rule."

"Why?" Jessie was no longer smiling. She had heard a lot of grim, sinister, and ugly tales that were woven around the name of Ambrose Loveless, trouble-shooter for the Crown.

"In the first place—" a smile twisted his mouth—"the look in your eyes might haunt me in the night. He added quickly as he saw her stiffen, "Secondly, I need someone I can trust all the way."

"To take care of your mail?"

HER voice sounded bitter.

"Don't let that bother you, lady. Wiley Clark picked up the bait I left. I wrote that registered letter to myself and gambled on Wiley Clark picking it up."

"Then you must have known how I run my post-office. Slipshod!"

"I know how most cow-country post-offices are run. That's what I was gambling on."

"The bait picked up by Wiley Clark. I've been told you're clever at baiting man traps."

His lips twisted in a grin.

"I have to be mighty careful, lady. I'm apt to get caught in my own man trap. That's the chance I take right now when I break my own set rule never to trust anyone." He was watching her narrowly. "There's still time for me to back away. Change my mind."

"It might be a good idea," said Jessie Brewster. "If I think there's a chance of my father being hurt in any way."

"If Lem Brewster has broken no laws of the Crown Land and Livestock Company, he's got nothing to be scared of."

"Lem Brewster's tally book is clean. Don't ever believe anything different."

"Nobody's calling Lem Brewster crooked, lady. Too easy-going, perhaps. A little too willing to give the other man the benefit of the doubt when some rep drags a maverick up to the branding fire and claims it. Or he might be a little near-sighted when it comes to reading a worked brand." Loveless was watching cold anger creep into her eyes, the stubborn set to her chin. "Lem Brewster gave me his tally book but I never bothered to open it. A trouble-shooter hasn't time to bother with easy-going men who should be getting fitted for a pair of steel-rimmed specs. The men I'm after are dangerous. Crooked as snake tracks. When I catch them, I expect to hand Lem Brewster back his ramrod job, and ride away."

"If I thought you meant that!" Her eyes were shining through a mist of unshed tears. "I'd ride along with you to the end of the trail."

"I wouldn't lie to you about a thing like that, lady."

"Will you quit calling me lady?" Her voice rose heatedly.

"I can call you Miss Brewster. I don't know you well enough for anything else."

"Will you choke if you call me Jessie?"

Loveless' grin came almost to reaching his eyes. "What I want you to do, Jessie, is this: Don't mention it to your father that I told you he'd get his job back."

"That's a hard job, mister." Her eyes were pleading. "I hate to see the beaten look in his eyes when I meet him. I know I'm going to break down and bawl like a sissy."

"You tell him, and he'll gum up the deal."

"I'll make him promise not to tell anybody."

"It'll show in his face. And they'll be watching him close. His job, even his life, might depend on his not knowing that he's not been fired for keeps."

He watched the brightness of her eyes shadow with dread and something like fear.

"Who are 'they'?" She lowered her voice as if somebody might be listening.

"Clyde Mettler and Wiley Clark," Loveless said flatly.

She reached out and took his hand. "I promise I won't tell my father. You don't know, you can't realize how much this means to me. I'd begun to hate and despise you. This changes everything."

"It's an easy thing for anybody to hate Ambrose Loveless. Don't make any hasty decisions. I may give you plenty cause to hate and despise me yet."

"I hope not." Her hand tightened in his.

LOVELESS felt the warm grip of her fingers and he thought he saw something lurking in the depths of her eyes. He felt his pulse quicken, and with it the urge to take Jessie Brewster in his arms and claim her with his lips. Something told him that if he wanted to kiss this girl she'd offer no resistance. But afterward she might feel only contempt for the man who made use of the father she loved, to gain a few moments of pleasure. The desire to claim Jessie Brewster died a-borning.

It wasn't only what the girl's reactions might be. It was something deep inside the man himself that stopped him before the impulse gained even feeble urge. This girl riding alongside him in the bright sunlight on the open prairie was different from any woman he had ever known. She was stirring something inside him that he had thought was dead. Dead ashes with only a coal left buried underneath were being fanned into life. The warming glow sent the blood pounding into quick pulse beats.

He was following a strange impulse when he lifted the girl's hand to his mouth and felt the warmth of its palm against his hard lips. Her hand seemed to press against his mouth of its own accord. Then he lowered her hand and they rode along like that for a long time, until they sighted the day herd, spread out and grazing.

"Whenever you feel an urge to tell your father, Jessie, remember the danger to him. I'm not trying to throw any scare into you, but men like Clyde Mettler and Wiley Clark play for keeps."

"I'll remember. What do your friends call you for a name?"

"I have no friends. They call me Loveless, or worse than that behind my back. My mother called me Ambrose after the patron sait of her parish." He grinned reminiscently. "She dressed me up in a Lord Fauntleroy black velvet suit with a lace collar and sent me to school. I came home with the suit ruined, and I was all skinned up. It was the combination of the name Ambrose and the Fauntleroy suit and the long curls." There was soft nostalgia in his low toned voice. "My father was an understanding man. He shortened the name to Ab and bought me some corduroy short pants and a jacket and had the barber cut my hair. I carried the curls home in a candy bag to give to my mother." He looked at the girl with strange eyes. "Nobody has called me Ab since I was a kid."

The smile reached his eyes then.

"Thank you, Ab," she said quietly. "What was your father like?"

"I reckon he looked about like I look now. He was a captain in the Confederate Army under Robert E. Lee's command. He was killed leading a cavalry charge. My mother died shortly after she got the news of his death. A month later the Yankees burned us out. There was nothing left in Kentucky to hold me. I was a kid when I joined Quantrell's guerrillas." The hard glint came back into his eyes. "From there on I just drifted in bad company for the most part until I started working for the Crown outfit. Now you know more about me than I ever told anybody."

She reached for his hand before he had time to regret the impulsive confidence.

"That's between you and me, Ab." Her eyes pleaded. "Don't regret it, ever."

"I won't, Jessie." His voice was quiet. "Here's where our trails fork. You stay on day herd with Lem Brewster. I've got cattle

to work. And Clyde Mettler and Wiley Clark to tend to."

IV

CHALK METCALF had left enough men at the holdup to keep what cattle they had gathered on the morning's circle from scattering. He and most of the crew were at camp, eating, when Loveless rode up and unsaddled.

Chalk's good eye looked at him from under his hat brim as Loveless piled grub in his tin plate and filled his coffee cup, then sat down alongside him. They sat apart from the others, cross-legged on the ground, where they could keep an eye on the worried-looking Clyde Mettler.

"Lem Brewster said to take a broke cow horse outa his string. You can't work cattle on a bronc. Mettler's edgy as sin and Wiley Clark hasn't showed up." Chalk spoke in a low tone.

"You didn't run off at the head to Brewster?" asked Loveless.

"I got better sense." Chalk grinned. "How'd you make out?"

"All right, I reckon. I halfway figured on Wiley Clark showing up. He's bound to have the joker up his sleeve."

"I'd hate to quit any man in a tight." Chalk spoke warningly. "But you lay a hand on that girl of Lem Brewster's, and I'll try my best to kill you."

Loveless looked at him for a long moment. "I reckon you would, at that, Chalk. I'd deserve killing. I wouldn't reach for a gun to stop you."

Chalk's one eye studied Loveless. "Well, I'll be hanged," he said softly, and reached for his coffee cup.

They rode out to where the holdup was, side by side in silence. For the better part of an hour they worked as a team, cutting the cows with unbranded calves, and now and then a slick-eared maverick.

Then they rode out to the edge of the herd to wind their sweating horses. Loveless rode over to where Clyde Mettler sat his horse.

"Have at it, Mettler."

Loveless went back and nodded to Chalk and they rode out to where the horse wrangler was grazing the remuda. Each roped a fresh horse out of the cavy and rode back.

It took a while for the Larb Hills rep and the other reps to get their cows with unbranded calves into the cut.

Then Loveless and Chalk went into the herd to cut the four-year-old beef steers into a separate cut.

Lem Brewster and Jessie rode over from the day herd to pick up the beef cut.

Loveless sat his horse near enough to Clyde Mettler to catch the green glint of his eyes and the sardonic grin on his face when he looked at Ambrose Loveless. Then Loveless rode across to Lem Brewster.

"Meet my daughter, Jessie," Lem said. "Jessie, this is Ambrose Loveless I been telling you about."

When Loveless tipped his hat he saw the cold look in Jessie Brewster's eyes and wondered what had gone wrong. If the girl was putting on an act, she was a mighty good actress. Because there was suspicion in her eyes, in the pale look on her set-lipped face.

Both acknowledged the introduction as if this was the first time they'd met. Loveless knew that Jessie had kept their meeting a secret from her father, and he took what satisfaction he could out of that.

Lem Brewster had a wide grin on his leathery face and a brightness showed in his faded blue eyes. Loveless mistook it for pride in his daughter.

"You'll have to find yourself a new beef boss, Loveless." Brewster's slow drawl had quickened a little. "The Crown will have to worry along somehow without old Lem Brewster."

"Anything gone wrong?"

BREWSTER shook his head. "You'd hardly call it that. But one of the Crown rules is that no man can work for a syndicate and own his own cow outfit at the same time. I just bought the Double Diamond, lock, stock and barrel. I got it at rock bottom price. I always had my eye on the outfit in the Larb Hills. Didn't have to waste time

dickering with Wiley Clark either."

"When," Loveless asked flatly, "did you make the deal?" He was telling himself that Wiley Clark had played the joker he had up his sleeve.

"This morning, while you boys were riding circle. Just about an hour before Jessie rode up."

That would have given Wiley Clark time to open the registered letter addressed to Ambrose Loveless, ride to the schoolhouse, then come straight out to the day herd Brewster was holding, close the deal and head back to town, leaving Clyde Mettler holding the empty sack. Wiley Clark had sold Lem Brewster a cattle rustler's nest filled with worked, branded cattle.

"Did you lay enough cash on the line to get a bill of sale?" asked Loveless.

"I wrote him out a check for all the money me'n my daughter has got in the bank." Lem Brewster looked guilty at Jessie.

"Ten thousand dollars," Jessie Brewster said, forcing a smile when her father looked at her. A smile that twisted a man's heart.

"Wiley Clark had the bill of sale already made out, all except filling in the amount. He seemed right anxious to get shut of the outfit, claiming he couldn't get along with his neighbors, and that he'd had a run-in with Mettler," Lem Brewster explained.

"Does Mettler know Wiley Clark sold out to you?"

"Nope. He made me promise not to tell Mettler until tomorrow. He claimed he was scared Mettler might kill him. He showed me the marks where Mettler had quirted him across the face. He sure wasn't putting it on. He was all broke out in a sweat and in a hurry. Don't know as I blame him much. Mettler is tough, and Wiley Clark is just a curly-headed dude and harmless."

Lem Brewster was in a good humor. "For a while there," he went on, "I figured Jessie was stuck on Wiley Clark. But I reckon she's got over it."

Jessie's white face flushed a little, then went pale again as she looked at Loveless. Her lips formed the words, "So Wiley picked up the bait."

"What you figure on doing with that bunch of long yearlings we throwed into the beef herd last night?" Loveless asked Brewster, making his voice sound casual. Several of the steers were grazing in plain sight and so close Loveless could read the worked brands.

"Cut 'em out," answered Brewster. "I ain't shipping anything under five-year-olds."

Loveless saw the stricken look in Jessie's eyes as she read the worked brands, and he knew then, what he'd been suspecting all along, that Lem Brewster was going blind. He could not read worked brands or any brand on a cow-brute's hide. It explained a lot of things that had been puzzling Ambrose Loveless. It came as a big relief to have the ugly suspicion lifted from the grizzled head of Lem Brewster.

The grin he gave Jessie was meant to be reassuring, but it did not lighten the dark shadows in her eyes.

"Don't cut 'em out of the day herd till you get word from me, Brewster. And keep your daughter on day herd with you. You'll hold down the beef boss job till I get a good man to take your place."

LOVELACE reined his horse and rode away. Jessie gave him a stiff-lipped smile that cut him like a knife as she rode up alongside him.

"Lem Brewster told nobody his eyesight was failing," she said. "He even tried to hide it from me. He knew the Crown would discharge him if they ever found out he was going blind. When Wiley Clark showed up with a bill of sale for the Double Diamond my father was more than ready to buy the outfit. You've caught a blind man in your trap, Loveless." Her voice broke.

"I thought there for awhile," he said quietly, "you'd call me Ab. I tried to warn you it wouldn't last."

Loveless reached out his hand.

She saw it and quickly moved her hand away. But he was not figuring on holding hands. He lifted the bill of sale she had in her chaps pocket. He looked it over swiftly and handed it back.

"It's dated six months back. A judge and jury would be duty bound to find Lem Brewster guilty of cattle rustling." Love-

less made it sound brutal.

"I'll say this much for you, mister. When you set a trap, you do a thorough job."

"It don't pay to be careless, if a man wants to hold down the job I've got." Loveless kept thinking of Wiley Clark pawing Jessie Brewster.

"I must be hard of hearing. I was positive I heard you say 'man.'"

"And while we're on the subject of men, when did you get tired of the attentions of Wiley Clark?" Loveless asked curtly.

Brewster had said he'd been worried for awhile about Jessie falling in love with Clark. The thought of Jessie in the arms of the curly-headed Clark was nauseating to Loveless, its taste bitter in his mouth.

"Those weren't Clyde Mettler's marks my father's dim eyes saw on the face of Wiley Clark. I marked him with my whip at recess this morning after I'd sent the school kids home." Jessie whirled her horse and rode back at a lope to join Lem Brewster.

Ambrose Loveless still had that tight cold knot inside his belly. He wouldn't admit, even to himself, that he was jealous. He could have, with a few short words, eased the girl's mind and he could have told Lem Brewster he had been tricked into a blind man's trap. He could have taken them both into his confidence, but the habit of long years had drilled secrecy into him.

This thing was building up to a climax, and he couldn't afford to take even the remotest chance of his cunningly planned man trap being prematurely sprung. He couldn't take a chance on his powder being wet, even a little damp, when he touched off the short fuse.

Chalk was riding close herd on Clyde Mettler and the brand artist was getting more edgy every hour. His green eyes kept watching the skyline for Wiley Clark.

Wiley Clark had played his hole card. He'd unloaded the Double Diamond on Lem Brewster's round-shouldered back and the nearly blind man was ignorant of his dangerous burden. But Lem's daughter would know that Wiley Clark was taking his revenge out on her for quirting his face. He wouldn't have the courage to come back and side his partner and get Clyde Mettler out of a bad tight. He'd sold out and would quit the country.

Loveless shook his head, as if to clear it, like a drunk with a hangover clearing the cobwebs from his brain. Then he lifted his horse to a lope. He pulled up close to where Chalk was waiting.

CHALK had seen him break into a lope and was stubbing out the butt of a half-smoked cigarette.

"Where does Lem Brewster do his banking, Chalk?"

"The bank at Wolf Point," Chalk said. "What's the rip?"

"Clark unloaded the Double Diamond on Lem Brewster. Why didn't you tell me the old feller was going blind?"

"Blind? That's the first I knowed about it."

"Wiley Clark has picked up the marbles and run for it."

"The devil you say!"

"I'm pulling out for Wolf Point. Keep that chalk eye of yours on Clyde Mettler."

"What if he tries to coyote?" asked Chalk.

"Don't kill him unless you're crowded bad. I want him kept alive."

Ambrose Loveless headed at a long lope for the grazing remuda. He had traveled not more than fifty yards when he heard the whine of a bullet past his head. Two shots blended close together. He slid to a stop and whirled the horse on its haunches. He saw the gun drop from Clyde Mettler's hand as the man clawed at his belly with both hands, then went down sideward and lay doubled up on the ground.

Chalk sat his saddle with the barrel of his six-shooter tilted skyward and a wisp of white smoke threading from the gun muzzle.

Loveless loped back. Chalk's good eye met his.

"I told him his pardner had quit the flats. He went plumb locoed sudden-like." Chalk looked down at the dying man. "Before I could bat an eyelid he had his gun in his hand. You made one pretty target from the back. It was either you or him."

Loveless had stepped down and was squatted beside the man.

"Get away from me, you coyote!" Clyde Mettler spat a mixture of saliva and blood at his face.

Loveless felt Chalk's hand grip his shoulder and pull him back. Chalk met Ambrose Loveless' accusing stare with a mirthless grin.

"So I shot the feller," Chalk said again, his voice flat-toned. "Lock a wild cowboy like him behind the bars of a pen, and in six months he'll go crazy. A man's better off dead."

"When our trails cross in hell—" there was a bloody froth on the dying man's twisted mouth—"I'll be reminded of the favor you done for me, you chalk-eyed lobo."

The other cowpunchers were headed this way, turning the cattle that had spooked back into the herd. Loveless could see Lem Brewster and Jessie leave the day herd.

Jessie was pointing and saying something to her half-blind father.

Loveless stepped up on his horse and loped off. He pulled a clean handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the bloody spittle from his face and the front of his shirt, and threw the soiled handkerchief away.

He could see Jessie slow down and he heard her shout something, but he never turned his head or gave any indication that he'd heard her shout his name. He'd let Chalk do the talking for him.

When he reached the remuda he caught the likeliest ridge-runner he could find and changed horses. He washed his hands and face when he crossed the first creek.

He was headed for Wolf Point.

V

IT WAS a seventy-five-mile ride from the roundup camp at the upper end of Sun Prairie to the cowtown of Wolf Point. Loveless changed horses three times and was lucky enough to get a good horse each time.

Wiley Clark had a head start, and he would know where he could pick up a relay of horses along the trail. He had Lem Brewster's ten-thousand-dollar check in his pocket and it would have to be cashed at the bank, the only place that would have that much available cash.

It would be impossible for Clark to reach the bank before closing time that day. He would have to wait until the bank opened at ten o'clock the next morning. That would give Loveless plenty of time.

Unless Wiley Clark threatened the banker into opening his vault sooner. And from what Loveless had learned about Wiley Clark's persuasive powers he might be able to swing that and make his getaway.

The long ride gave Ambrose Loveless time to do a lot of thinking back. When Clyde Mettler got his warning to sell out and cancel his Double Diamond brand, he had sold his outfit to a man named Wiley Clark, claiming Clark had hired him to gather the remnants and close out the iron.

It was part of Loveless' trouble-shooting job to investigate Wiley Clark. It had taken him almost a year to uncover the snake tracks that Clark and Mettler had covered up on their back trail. A trail that went back years to The Dalles in Oregon where they had been raised together.

Teaming up, they had been successful as cattle rustlers and horse thieves. Before the law caught up with them, they had drifted out of Oregon into California and Nevada, pulling the same brand-artist trick, moving in on the fringe of big outfits and getting a brand registered, building up a quick herd and selling out to some sucker. They were a pair of smooth, slick and slippery customers, who had done their share of killings in California and Nevada.

Loveless had set his trap by writing a letter to himself on Crown stationery, signing the president's name. The letter told Ambrose Loveless that after he had taken over Lem Brewster's job as ramrod he was to look up the records of Wiley Clark and Clyde Mettler, dig up their back trails and make a careful undercover investigation of the two men. Then he was to file a report and drop out of the investigation.

Loveless had registered the letter to himself, using the Sun Prairie post-office, and had gambled on it being stolen. That was the bait Wiley Clark had picked up.

Loveless also had written the letter he

handed to Lem Brewster. He had never believed Brewster was in on the rustler deal, but he took no chances and he trusted no man, or woman.

Even now that Jessie Brewster had come into his life, he couldn't afford to let himself fall in love. Loveless was a man-hunter. And up until right now he'd liked his trouble-shooter job, for the excitement and the sport of the game. Man-hunting, in his book, was the biggest game hunt on earth.

Now all the zest had been drained out of it, the excitement was gone from the man-hunt. He had never been drunk in his life, but he knew now what a drunkard feels like when he sobers up. Sick, nauseated from swilling booze. He had that same sick, empty feeling and the taste of it, bitter in his mouth. He'd been on a too prolonged hunt. Trapping renegades and sending them to prison, or killing those who had the nerve to fight back. Hunting down his own cow-puncher breed of man.

"There, but for the grace of God . . ." Loveless' words mocked him. And it applied to every man he had ever tracked down.

THE bitterness rode him far into the black, starless night. Toward midnight it commenced to drizzle and the cold rain soaked him.

Back yonder he had seen a man dying. Chalk had shot him and saved the life of Ambrose Loveless. He'd forgotten to thank Chalk. Even if he'd thought to remember, something in Chalk Metcalf's one eye had forbidden it. That one eye had been cold, unfriendly. There had been hatred in it, which Loveless understood.

Chalk had done time in the Texas pen for cattle rustling. Loveless, with the backing of the Crown outfit, had got him paroled, because in the long-ago days Ambrose Loveless and Chalk Metcalf had been pardners, selling wet cattle to the Crown.

Chalk hated the job he sometimes was forced to hold, siding Ambrose Loveless. There was a streak of real man, of decency in Chalk, and Loveless knew that all he had to do was fire himself as trouble-shooter, the job he'd created for himself, and Chalk would be his friend.

Loveless rode through the night, soaked and chilled to the bone. He welcomed the discomfort because it was some sort of minor counter-irritation to the black sickness inside him.

He rode into the cowtown of Wolf Point before dawn. Dim blobs of yellow light showed in the black drizzle from a few saloon windows.

Loveless located the depot and dismounted. He was shivering, and water dropped off his low-pulled hat. His spurred boots sank ankle-deep in the gumbo clay and puddled water. A light showed through the window and he could see the night telegrapher and station agent bent over his telegraph instruments, the light shining on his green eye-shade and balding head.

The waiting room was empty and shadowed, almost dark. Its dry warmth was welcome. He rapped with a chilled fist on the wooden panel that covered the ticket window. He had to rap several times before it slid open impatiently.

"What time is the next passenger train due?" Loveless asked.

"How many times do I have to tell you, you pestering fool! . . . Oh, it ain't the same man. The other one had on a yellow slicker. The westbound is due through here at four A.M. It's three thirty-five now. It don't stop except on flag. I'm flagging it down for the other man."

"Thanks, mister." Loveless had to jerk his hand away fast to keep it from getting smashed when the window was slammed shut.

He went out quickly before he gave in to the temptation to linger in the dry warmth of the waiting room. He rode to the livery stable and unsaddled his horse around in back and turned him in with several more in the feed yard. He unbuckled his chaps and spurs and left them with his saddle, then headed back towards the depot. He didn't dare take the risk of being sighted while he peered into the lighted windows of the saloons. Wiley Clark wouldn't be fool enough to be caught in a lamplit saloon.

A short distance down the track from the

depot was the high water tower and line of tall coal chutes. It was dry under the chutes and he stood there, flexing the chilled numbness from his arms and legs. He tried drawing his six-shooter and shoving it back in its wet scabbord. He was gambling now on Wiley Clark somehow having cashed the ten-thousand-dollar check or he wouldn't be pestering the night telegrapher about the train. Loveless gambled it was Wiley Clark in the yellow slicker.

MINUTES dragged. He had no watch and even if he had he couldn't have run the risk of lighting a match to see the time. He took some satisfaction from the fact that Wiley Clark was somewhere waiting for the same train.

The distant sound of a locomotive whistle wailed dismally through the wet night. Loveless watched the depot building. He saw the door open and in the reflected light saw a man in a yellow slicker go inside the waiting room.

Again came the long wailing, mournful sound of the locomotive whistle, and the lonesome wail found an echo in the darkness inside him. The headlight bored a hole through the black tunnel of the night and the wet steel rails glistened. Loveless shrank into a crouch behind the wide pilings of the water tank tower.

He saw the station agent come out, wearing a long black raincoat, his cap pulled down, a railway lantern in his hand. The strong glare of the headlight picked him up between the rails, swinging his lantern.

There was no sign of the man in the yellow slicker. He must be still inside the waiting room. Loveless should have remembered that the water tank was on the opposite side of the tracks from the depot. He cursed himself now as he crossed the tracks at a running crouch in the full glare of the blinding headlight. He ducked in behind the tool shed, a good hundred yards down the tracks from the depot. If Wiley Clark had been on a sharp lookout he could not have helped but sight him.

Loveless crouched now like a runner toeing his mark. He had his gun gripped in his hand.

Loveless looked up as the locomotive went past, brakes squealing on a sanded track. Then he was hidden in a cloud of hissing steam and he started running alongside the moving train, his slitted eyes fixed on the wide plank platform. The bell was clanging loudly and the engine whistle was sharp, shrill enough to pierce a man's eardrums. The train had slowed down, braking to a stop.

As the engine passed the depot, the engineer leaned out and bellowed something to the station agent. He had sighted Loveless crouched with a gun in his hand and he thought it was a train holdup. He yelled to the station agent that he wasn't stopping and began giving the engine the throttle, to pick up the lost speed.

The man in the yellow slicker heard the shouted warning, ran from the depot and across the wide plank platform that glistened wetly. Running as fast as he could in the cumbersome saddle slicker, he tilted his head sideward, looking up for something to grab and hang onto.

The car that was passing the running Loveless had its platform lifted. The brakeman stood in the vestibule at the top of the steps, a lantern in his hand. Loveless kept pace and he could see the yellow slicker headed his way. The distance between the two runners was closing rapidly.

Loveless shouted at Wiley Clark and saw the six-shooter in the man's hand a split-second before it spat a jet of flame. Loveless felt a thudding, burning stab along his thigh as the .45 slug ripped a flesh wound.

He pulled his gun trigger as he lurched off-balance. Wiley Clark stumbled and his left arm reached out to grip the steel rail that sloped down from the steps. The momentum of the train jerked him off-balance and flung him sideward as he lost his footing. His wet hand lost its grip and he was thrown off the platform onto the cindered roadbed. His horrible high-pitched scream knifed the night as he went down and out of sight.

The brakeman had pulled the air cord and the engine crew obeyed his signal to stop. The brakeman swung off with his bobbing lantern.

LOVELESS forced himself to look at what was left of Wiley Clark. His wet face had a sickly gray look as he bent over, reached in under the yellow slicker and found what he wanted underneath the dead man's flannel shirt. His hands were unsteady as he unbuckled the money-belt and pulled it free. Without a word of explanation to the train crew and station agent, Loveless limped away into the black drizzle, leaving them to puzzle it out.

The pain throbbed in his leg. When he reached the barn he found some rolls of bandage and cotton in the saddle room and fashioned a bandage around the bullet rip in his thigh, using a bottle of horse liniment freely to wash the open wound. The potent stuff had a hornet's sting but he gave no indication of pain.

But there was a black turmoil inside the man that deadened any physical pain. He had the money-belt buckled on. All his movements were automatic, like a sleep-walker's moves. Only when he had to take his pick of the horses in the barn did the dazed look clear from his eyes. He saddled his horse, and buckled on his chaps and spurs and rode out of town without bothering to look back.

He headed for the Crown roundup camp and the ghosts of two dead men rode through the darkness with him. The dead men were more welcome companions in the black drizzle than the vision of a live girl whose face kept appearing.

It was the girl he dreaded meeting, and he fought off the temptation to ride away from it, as he had ridden away and left Wolf Point behind. He could send the money-belt by mail to Lem Brewster, and a letter to Chalk to pick up the chips and kindling he'd left behind him. He knew that he would resign as trouble-shooter for the Crown.

There was a darkness inside the man that no light could penetrate, and a sickness that went with it. There was no earthly cure for the strange malady. All his past was centered there. Every renegade he had ever hunted down and sent to prison or killed, all the traps he'd set for those men, all the dim trails he'd ridden entwined and tightened in a black knot that was crammed somewhere inside him to weigh the heart in his cold body like gun lead, and deaden his brain. It was like poison in his blood, filling his mouth with a bitter brassy taste, putting a glaze across his eyes.

He never knew when it stopped raining or when the black clouds broke in the sky or when the stars showed through the breaks. He never took notice when the sky slowly grayed and the crimson streaks came like blood smears across the dawn.

He didn't know the rider was Chalk Metcalf until he came up within earshot and saw the glitter of Chalk's good eye like an evil star. Then he looked beyond Chalk and saw Lem Brewster and his daughter Jessie.

What ails you, Loveless?" he heard Chalk ask. "Did Wiley Clark get away from you?"

"Wiley Clark is dead."

Loveless unbuckled the money belt and wearily handed it to Lem Brewster as he rode up. . . .

Lem Brewster had a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles hooked over his ears and his faded blue eyes had lost their squinted, peering look.

"These specs—" Lem grinned uncertainly—"belong to the cook." He held the money-belt in his hand and kept looking down at the dried blood that crusted the glove leather pouches.

"I didn't take time to count the money," Loveless said flatly, "but I reckon the ten thousand's all there."

He reined his horse away before Jessie Brewster rode up, and headed off at a slow lope.

THEY stared after him. When Chalk spoke to Jessie, his voice had a strained, dry-throated sound.

"I knowed it would catch up with him some time. It was bound to. I saw it in his eyes and it scared me. I told you all I know about Ambrose Loveless, Jessie. It's up to you to fill in the gaps for yourself. Only a woman can do that."

Jessie whirled her horse and rode after Loveless. "Ab!" she called.

Loveless thought he heard it but couldn't be certain. He'd been hearing it for so long

in his imaginings and he could not trust his ears. His hat was pulled down and he rode with lowered head.

"Ab!" It sounded close behind him. Now she was alongside him and he felt the tug on his ivory-handled six-shooter as she pulled the gun from its holster and threw it away.

"Ab!" There was a sob in her voice.

Their horses slowed, and came to a leg-weary stop. Only then did he dare trust himself to look at her and the tears that welled in her eyes.

"You don't need to talk, Ab. Clyde Mettler told everything before he died. We'll start from here. A woman knows when a man loves her. You'll never ask me, but I love you, Ab, and want to be your wife. I'll go with you wherever you go." Her words stumbled out in a breathless desperate urgency.

Jessie Brewster couldn't see through unshed tears how the pallor had left his skin and the healthy color returned, how the hard glaze melted in his eyes. His arms reached out and around her and his mouth bruised her lips.

"I've got enough money banked to take us around the world on a wedding trip, Jessie."

"I don't want to go around the world. Let's take the Double Diamond, Ab. If you like the Larb Hills for a cow country."

"It suits me. I'm firing myself from the trouble-shooter job with the Crown. We'll have Lem Brewster fitted for a pair of specs and he can keep on ramrodding the Montana Crown outfit."

When they rode up and Chalk held out his hand, Loveless gripped it, and the grin on his hard-lipped mouth reached his eyes.

"I'd like to ask for your daughter Jessie's hand in marriage, Lem." Ambrose Loveless spoke quietly.

"I'm proud to give her to you, son. Almighty proud."

INDIAN STAFF OF LIFE

TO THE Indian, the buffalo was the staff of life. It supplied him with food, clothing, dwelling and tools. The robe was the Indian's winter covering and his bed. The skin, freed from the hair and dressed, constituted his summer sheet or blanket. Dressed hides were used for moccasins, leggings, shirts, and women's dresses. Dressed cow skins formed the Indian's lodge.

Braided strands of rawhide furnished the Indians with ropes and lines. Sometimes these were made from the twisted hair. The green hide was sometimes used as a kettle in which to boil meat. Or stretched over a frame of boughs, the hides gave the Indians the boats to cross rivers.

The tough thick hide of the bull's neck was allowed to shrink smooth. Then it was made into a shield which would turn a lance thrust, an arrow, or even the ball from an old fashioned smooth bore gun. The cannon bones and ribs were used to make implements for dressing hides. The shoulder blades were lashed to sticks and used as hoes and axes. From the ribs of the buffalo were made the runners for small sledges drawn by dogs.

The hoofs were boiled to make a glue that was used for fastening the feathers and heads on their arrows. The hair was used to stuff cushions and as ornaments on war shields and such.

The sinews lying along the back of the buffalo were used for thread and bowstrings. The horns furnished spoons and ladles. Water bags were made from the lining of the paunch.

The Indians killed small game, such as elk, deer, and antelope, but their main item of food was the buffalo.

About the year 1870 a market began in the East for buffalo hides. Hunters killed the buffalo for their hides only and let the meat rot on the ground. It was this destruction of the buffalo that was one of the main causes of Indian warfare against the white man. Dodge City, Kansas, was one of the great centers from which buffalo hides were shipped to the East. Alas, the only buffalo that most people have seen is the one on our five-cent coin.

—Harold Gluck

He was a friend to all — even to those whose horses he swiped

Remarkable Horse Thief

By GLENN SHIRLEY

GEORGE W. PIKE, who spent the latter part of his life as a respected citizen of Douglas, Wyoming, was incomparably the best horse thief the West ever produced.

Where he came from originally is not known, but Western lore and range gossip have it that when he dropped off a train at Antelope in 1885, he was about thirty years old. And already he apparently had acquired the background for what was to come.

At that time Wyoming Territory was suffering from growing pains. The Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley Railroad was building a track up the Platte, to provide shipping points for cattle from the central plains of Wyoming. Previously it had been necessary to drive the herds to the North-

ern Pacific Railway in Montana, or to the Union Pacific to the south.

All kinds of settlements had sprung up in advance of the railroad construction gangs. Town site companies had been organized in anticipation of great profits to be made in the sale of real estate with the coming of the tracks.

That Was Antelope

The town of Antelope was such a settlement. The day George Pike got off the train there the town boasted of more than three hundred inhabitants, and the wildest entertainment to be found anywhere along the line. It was a single street of tents for business establishments, and small shacks in the rear of them for homes. In one of these shacks, George W. Pike took up residence.

There was nothing in his personal appearance to bring special attention to the man. He was of medium weight and build, with dark complexion and hair. But he had a ready smile, and this quickly won him friends, just as a wildness in his blood attracted him to the sporting element, like a magnet. He became an inveterate gambler.

And it was one night when he rode a hundred and seventy-five miles to play poker —and lost everything he had—that he launched on his career that was to bring him recognition as the most unique character in Wyoming.

Including the Kitchen Stove

His exploits began immediately on his return to Antelope. In a tent near Pine's shack lived a bachelor named Will Reid. One evening Reid left his meal simmering on the stove while he went to the store for some potatoes. When he returned, he could only stare in surprise. A hole in the top of the canvas showed where the stove *had* been, and the stew pans in which he had left his meal cooking were piled upon the table, still warm. But the stove was certainly gone!

At a loss to guess who could have pulled such a trick, Reid went outside and looked around. Quickly he observed a new pipe through the roof of the shack occupied by Pike, with smoke coming from it.

He approached the place grimly, and the genial Pike met him at the door.

"Good evening, Will," he said heartily. "How's everything?"

Reid never said a word. He shoved past into the tent, and at one side he saw his stove—with a fire blazing in it and supper bubbling in Pike's stew pans.

"That's my stove!" stormed Reid. "And I'm going to take it!"

"Why, Will," Pike replied sorrowfully, "you shouldn't be saying that. Sounds like you think I'm not honest. Just stop and think. Your stove had four legs, didn't it? Well, this one has only three. Your stove had four lids on top, too, and this one has only three."

That was true. Reid felt suddenly deflated. But not so much that he couldn't see that one of the legs of the stove had been removed and that three bricks had taken its place. One of the lids also had been replaced by a piece of tin.

The outlandish piece of petty thievery rocked the countryside. Reid made every possible attempt to prove ownership to the stove, with the only result, according to records, that he was left in a "ridiculous light" and Pike in "gleeful possession."

A Lawyer by the Year

In September, 1885, the railroad reached the settlements up the Platte. The town site company had laid out the town of Douglas half a mile south of Antelope, and the tent city was swiftly absorbed by the new influx when the population jumped to twenty-five hundred in sixty days.

A cattleman named Curt Sears offered George Pike a partnership in a small ranch on Duck Creek, forty miles north, and Pike left Douglas. And began a record for horse stealing which had never before, and has never since been equalled!

For the next fifteen years there were few terms of court when George Pike did not appear on the docket on at least two counts. He hired Fred Harvey, one of Wyoming's

most brilliant lawyers, paying him an annual salary, and Pike, the horse-stealing specialist, was never convicted of a crime. Obviously he never served a term in the penetentiary.

Usually his defense was an alibi. In one case, when the evidence was utterly against him, a Mexican took the stand and testified that on the morning of the alleged theft Pike had eaten breakfast with him on Pine Ridge, many miles away.

Later, when a friend asked Pike if he *had* eaten breakfast with the Mexican on that date, Pike grinned.

"Sure did," he said. "But it was a year ago. I got the Mexican to believing he had his dates mixed, that's all. He was so sure he was telling the truth he convinced everybody else."

Lovable Thief

Everybody loved George Pike, even those from whom he stole. Some even claimed he was generous—a kind of Robin Hood horse thief. Once he stole a horse from a poor man named Niedeauer who, when he could get no satisfaction from the authorities, took the bull by the horns and went straight to Pike. When Niedeauer explained that he didn't have enough money to buy another horse, the genial horse thief said, waving a hand grandly toward his well-stocked corral:

"Oh, that's all right. Go down there and pick out one for yourself. Tell the boys I sent you."

One day a ranchman named Bob Carey, who owned the CY spread, looked Pike up in a saloon.

"Pike," he said, "you've been stealing CY stock, and we know it! From now on my men will be on the lookout for you, and if you show your face inside CY fences again, they'll shoot to kill! I've come to give you a piece of advice. Be a good fellow, George, and keep away from there."

Pike grinned. "All right, Bob," he agreed. "I'll tell you what I'll do. You give me a twenty-dollar bill, and we'll call it square."

His audacity was unbelievable, even for the old West.

When he was charged with the theft of an expensive saddle by a man named John Morton, Pike swore someone put it on his horse to get even with him. He was acquitted.

Nor did George Pike stick strictly to the horse stealing on which his reputation was based. There are stories about how he "rolled" drunks, intimidated greenhorns, and once held up the saloon run by George Smith, and ran out the door, tossing the loot on top of the awning to be recovered later, and other tales too numerous to relate in brief.

Too Big to Touch?

But the tables finally were turned on George W. Pike. He had been so successful for years that he got to feeling that he had grown too big for any ordinary man to try to tilt against him. So he decided there was no longer any need for paying a lawyer, and he fired Fred Harvey.

That was the beginning of the end. Two months later, he rode into Douglas, boiling mad. Will Reid, the man who had lost his stove in Antelope years before, had stolen a horse from Pike's pasture, the specialist in such thievery accused. It was something he wouldn't stand for, and had no intention of doing!

The story was too amazing to be true! But it was. And a tide of laughter swept down the valley.

Pike didn't think it was funny at all. He swore out a warrant for Reid. Reid was arrested and bound over for trial in the next term of district court. Pike was so confident Reid would be convicted that he promised to buy drinks for the whole town and range if Reid should be freed.

Reid asked a lawyer, Charles F. Maurer, to defend him. He showed Maurer a bill of sale for the horse and claimed he had purchased the animal from a Mormon emigrant who had passed through the country a few days before. Maurer knew well enough the paper was a forgery, and he wanted no part of it. Still his sympathies were with the man whom Pike had victimized so long ago —and got away with it. So he told Reid his only hope was to get Fred Harvey, who was

onto all George Pike's tricks.

"Pay him two hundred and fifty dollars," Maurer said, "and ask him to plead for you before the jury. You won't go wrong."

Reid did hire Harvey. And on the day of the trial, everybody for miles around flocked to Douglas.

Pike's evidence was presented, and it was conclusive. One witness swore he had tracked Reid from the pasture. Another testified he had seen Reid leading the horse away. Pike smiled triumphantly.

Then Fred Harvey, the lawyer he had discharged, rose to his feet and addressed the jury.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I find myself in a rather interesting position today." He emphasized the fact that he had come there to defend Will Reid for stealing a horse from George Pike, then added, "Now, gentlemen, Pike is a horse thief himself. I know, because I defended him for fifteen years." He paused, and there was a ripple of merriment, before he went on. "Once he told me that if he ever had a horse in his pasture that he had come by honestly, he would shoot it so it would not contaminate the rest."

The proceedings were suspended while the court and the jury recovered from convulsions.

The lawyer talked on for fifteen minutes, interrupted frequently by fresh outbursts of laughter. Not from George W. Pike. Finally Harvey made his closing remark:

"Now, gentlemen, how in the name of justice can you conscientiously convict the defendant, Will Reid, of stealing a horse from George Pike, when you know perfectly well that Pike himself stole the horse in the first place?"

He Earned His Epitaph

With the whole courtroom in an uproar, the jurymen rose to their feet and without leaving the box brought in a verdict of "Not Guilty."

George Pike was busy for a week passing out and paying for drinks. After that, he sent word to all law officers up and down the Platte Valley that he was through.

"Look for somebody else from now on," he told them.

And there is no evidence that he ever did steal anything else for the rest of his life.

When he died in 1908, he was buried in a little cemetery on the hill east of Douglas, and his friends passed the hat to erect a stone over his grave. On it appears this epitaph:

GEORGE W. PIKE

Underneath this stone in eternal rest
Sleeps the wildest one of the wayward West;
He was a gambler, sport, and cowboy, too,
And he led the pace in an outlaw crew.
He was sure on the trigger, and stayed to the end,
But he was never known to quit a friend.
In the relation of death all mankind is alike,
But in life there was only one George W. Pike.

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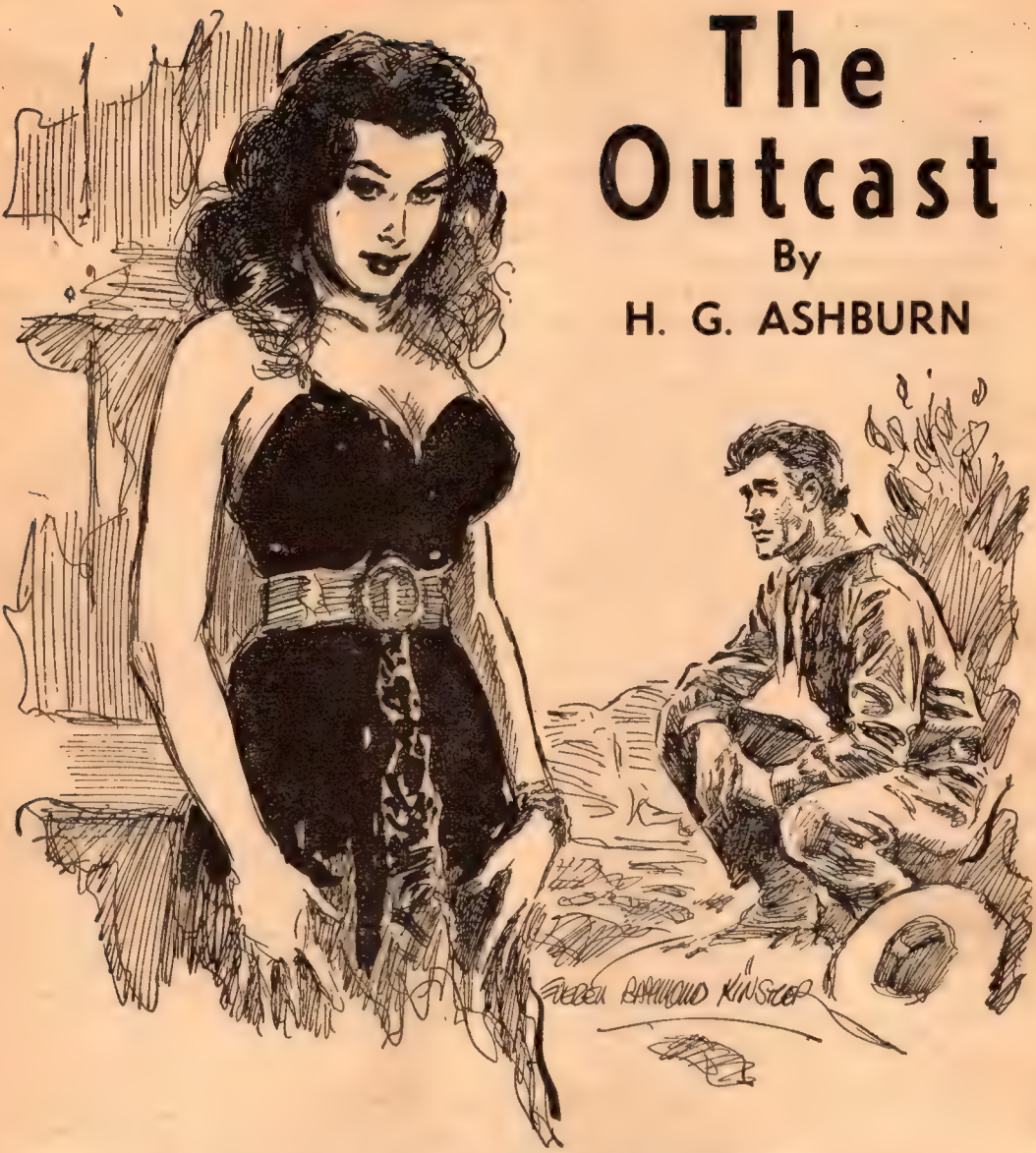
The Outcast

By

H. G. ASHBURN



The mestizo boy was being forced to betray his only two friends—the big Tejano and the so beautiful senorita

IN THE warmth of the bright, early morning sun a spindle-limbed youth sat in the thick dust at the edge of the palm-covered portico that fronted the cantina. He was not a handsome boy. His cocoa-colored skin stretched from one jutting bone to the next, giving his appearance a mass of angles rather than any semblance of roundness.

His eyes, nose, mouth, all of his features, seemed to be too large for his body. But the most striking thing was his hair. No son of Erin ever had redder hair than this youth. Hence his name, El Rojo.

There were better places to soak up the heat of the morning sun, but only here could he display the shining new boots that adorned his feet. This was the first time in all his tedious eleven years that he had possessed anything of which he was proud. Behind half-closed lids, sharp eyes were watching for an admiring glance. A complimentary word was too much for him to expect.

On the portico, leaning against the mud-plastered adobe wall where the slanting rays of the sun were the warmest, sat two men wrapped in their brightly colored serapes.

"Never have I seen a man so angry as Don Luis," observed one muffled voice. "I think he is loco when he hear the senorita is gone."

"They say he will give much gold to the one who bring her back to the hacienda," replied the other.

"It is stupid to run away from the easy life at the hacienda," said the first depreciatingly.

"Perhaps, but it is easy to be stupid when one is in love."

"Ah, the gringo? The senorita had big eyes for him. You think she go with him?"

"Quien sabe. But today there is no wedding."

"Si, and no fiesta."

El Rojo drank in their words. It was the second time this morning he had heard snatches of conversation on this topic. Something very important had taken place and his curiosity was aroused. But he knew better than to ask a direct question. His status in society would merit little besides a contemptuous grunt.

El Rojo was a mestizo, and in the sleepy, isolated village of Lomito that was bad. Situated in the wild brush country between the Nueces and the Rio Grande, the settlement was largely Mexican with a sprinkling of Texans. Both factions were clannish, and held a guarded distrust for each other.

Had he been all Mexicano, he might have found sympathy among the Mexicans. Were he a Tejano, some Texan might have taken him in. But he was a cross-breed, which made him a gringo to one faction, and a Mexican to the other. Neither group wanted anything to do with the ugly orphan.

AS FAR back as he could remember he had been an outcast. Even while his mother was alive, he was constantly being shunted out of her way as she plied her trade with the customers at the cantina.

"Poor Don Luis," muttered one of the men, shifting his round belly to a more comfortable position, "he has waited these many years for Senorita Amapola to become of age so he can marry with her."

"Si," agreed his friend, "since the death of her father, he has regarded the Arguello rancho as his own. He will lose more than just a bride."

"The gringo he hire to capture the ladinos has captured the senorita instead."

"I think she is lost," sighed the other philosophically. Every road is guarded but this gringo is like the devil. No one knows where he goes. Still Don Luis will not give up. He has sent all of the vaqueros on the rancho out to search for them."

"I would like the gold, but this Llano Kid—" He shook his head.

The large ears of the youth stood up at the mention of the Llano Kid. Don Luis' misfortune was of no concern to him. Only once had he seen the senorita. That was when her father was buried at the church. All he could remember was a slight figure swathed in a heavy black veil.

But the Kid was different. The handsome gringo was the closest thing he had to a friend. It was the Llano Kid who had given him the new boots.

A scowl wrinkled the brown forehead under the tangled mass of red hair. He reached for the toe of his boot and smoothed a small scuff in the leather. How did that get there? He had been so careful when he walked in his new boots. The Llano Kid would think he was careless with the gift, and never would he permit the Kid to have such a thought.

For the Llano Kid was the finest man in the whole of El Rojo's small world.

The boy inhaled the sharp spicy odor which emanated from the two men behind him. It sharpened the empty feeling in his stomach. In his active mind he went over the possibilities of securing breakfast.

He could sneak into the tienda and filch a quick snack, but only yesterday the sharp-eyed wife of Lorenzo had caught him at that. Sometimes good food

was to be found in the garbage behind the cantina, if he got there before the dogs devoured it. The easiest method was to beg a coin from a drunken vaquero, but no, it was much too early for that.

First he decided to cache his boots so he could move noiselessly in search of his morning meal. It had been easier in the old days when he was younger. People had been less vigilant of him then. But now, he was too large for a child and too small for a man. He had to be doubly careful.

In a few years when he was older, perhaps he could become a vaquero on the Arguello rancho, or better still, a rider with Juan Lopez. Lopez's men were secretly admired by most of the villagers. They were a dashing lot, with their fast caballos and big pistolas. They would vanish for a time, away on a mission that people spoke of in whispers, then return with many gold coins in their pockets. And if by chance any of the dreaded Texas Rangers invaded this remote section of the brasada, these men, as well as others, would disappear into the chaparral until the lawmen departed.

He slipped off his boots and wiped away the dust with a sleeve of his tattered shirt.

"Hah, Rojo, where did you steal the boots?"

EL ROJO glanced up into the sinister, dissipated features of Juan Lopez. In spite of his reputation for bravery and daring, the boy could not repress an inherent dislike for him.

"I did not steal them," answered El Rojo. "The Tejano gave them to me."

"Do not lie to me." Juan took a swipe at the boy, but El Rojo was adept at dodging blows.

"I swear by the Holy Virgin—the Llano Kid buy them for me," said the boy excitedly. "Ask Gonzales who make them in his shop."

"The Llano Kid," mused Juan, his dirty fingers rubbing the black stubble on his chin. A sudden light flashed in his smoldering eyes and the loose folds of his pockmarked skin twisted into a contemplative grin. "You are a friend of this gringo?"

The boy was familiar with the lightening changes of Lopez's moods. One moment he could be as docile as a dove, the next flare up like an angry puma. El Rojo was careful to stay beyond his reach.

"Si, si," responded the boy. "He is my good friend."

Juan laughed derisively. "You think I believe that." His manner was accusative, and seemed to say: Who can you call a good friend—you, a mestizo. Your mother, a prostitute and your father,

who knows who your red-headed father was?

The boy felt that he was being stripped of the one tie he had with human society and a desperation seized him. "But it is the truth," he cried. "He is my good friend."

"Bah!" snorted Juan. "You do not even know where to find him."

El Rojo was on the defensive. It was true he had no idea where to find the Llano Kid. Like most of the Americans who wandered into this wild region the Kid said little and kept to himself.

"I know where he is," lied El Rojo brazenly. He was determined to let no one belittle his relationship with the tall Texan.

Juan regarded the boy speculatively through the narrow slits of his eyes. "I have some words to say to this Llano Kid," said Juan, glancing sharply at the boy.

"He will come to town in a few days, I think," replied El Rojo lightly.

Juan smiled. He took a gold double eagle from his pocket and began tossing it into the air, catching it deftly in his palm.

The boy's eyes grew round, fascinated by the valuable coin.

"You like to have this gold?" asked Juan with a knowing grin.

"Si, Senor Juan."

"I will give it to you if you take me to the Llano Kid tonight."

El Rojo was thinking of the many things the heavy gold coin could bring him.

A warm serape to shield him from the cold of the night, much food so he would not know hunger for many days. "To—tonight," he stammered, looking up at Juan Lopez.

"Si, I must see him tonight."

That did not give El Rojo much time. The big Texan once mentioned his cow camp out in the brasada. That was before he went to work for Don Luis. If he was not at the Arguello hacienda, reasoned El Rojo, he would naturally go to his camp.

HOWEVER, travel was difficult in the brush country. It was possible to lose oneself a few miles from town. Often men had disappeared into the brasada never to be heard from again. For that reason it was a haven to those who were in trouble and wished to avoid the sharp eyes of the Texas Rangers.

The good things the gold piece would bring were a powerful draw. He had all day to scout around and look for the Tejano's camp. The Llano Kid always rode toward the old mission when he left town. El Rojo was sure he would find his friend.

"I will take you to him tonight," promised the boy.

"Buenas, I will meet you here when it grows dark," replied Juan Lopez. He allowed the boy another good look at the golden coin and dropped it casually into his pocket. He mounted his horse. El Rojo watched him take the trail to the Arguello hacienda.

The flaming-haired youth was light hearted. This was his lucky day. He made his way to an abandoned adobe shed and hid his boots. As he passed the rear of a mud-thatched caseta he saw an old woman baking at the out-door oven. A huge iron pot of frijoles was boiling over an open fire and she was making tortillas on a flat stone. Suddenly she dashed into her dwelling. Before she returned El Rojo had his breakfast and was safely away. Truly, this was a day when fortune smiled upon him.

His mind was full of the abundance of things the gold would bring him when he again entered the main street. He struck off down the old mission trail, and an excitement gripped him, as he thought of seeing the Llano Kid again.

Often El Rojo had watched him jog along this trail. The Llano Kid rode easily, his long, slim body swaying with the motion of the horse. What a fine man he was! There was always a ready smile on his big angular face. His skin was fair, though deeply tanned by the sun, but his sandy hair was made for skin like that. Only El Rojo had hair that did

not match his skin.

He wondered why the people of Lomita had such a deep distrust for the Llano Kid. Perhaps it was because when he first arrived he wore the gray uniform of a soldier, and he told no one his name. Of course no one was foolish enough to ask him, because the Kid was not one to trifle with. The two big pistolas he wore strapped to his hips, looked dangerous, and anyone could tell he knew how to use them. Also there was the long bladed knife tucked in his belt. Whether a person liked the Kid or not, one gave him respect.

To the boy no explanation was necessary for the Kid's presence in Lomita, but the rest of the townspeople preferred to look for some mystery.

El Rojo crossed the arid stretch of sage-covered desert. At a turn in the trail he came face to face with one of Don Luis' vaqueros. The boy paled as he looked into the round, black bore of a carbine. The man grunted and lowered the rifle. El Rojo plunged into the thick growth of chaparral.

He approached the old mission ruins with trepidation, and stopped, drank at the bubbling spring. The inhabitants of Lomita always gave a wide berth to this spot. There were whispers of a wraith-like form that wandered over these grounds on moonless nights, the ghost of a murdered padre. But the Llano Kid had no fear, and El Rojo forced himself to trespass the haunted area. He plunged into the thick screen of chaparral with its floor of tough tabosa grass. A maze of game runs and trails made by wild mustangs criss-crossed the huge magote. One of these trails led to the camp of his friend.

PATIENTLY he searched every avenue where it seemed likely a horseman could penetrate. He pushed deeper into the wild tangle of undergrowth where the yellow huisache and white brush perfumed the air with its heavy fragrance. The agrita spines, catclaw and Spanish dagger stood like a hostile army to prevent his progress which was necessarily slow. But El Rojo was as familiar with the malicious wild beauty as any ladino, and he twisted through their tortuous clutches with a minimum of scratches. Nowhere could he find a trace of the Llano Kid's camp.

He moved on over a rock-covered ridge that stretched like a long, bony finger to bisect the huge island of brush. He followed a trail that bored into a second and even denser thicket.

This magote was damper than the first, more like the bogs of a tropical swamp. The trail broke through a screen of twenty foot mesquite and quebradora. A relatively broad avenue was eaten away by the animals, leaving a roof of interlacing, thorny branches overhead. It led to an old stream bed that glittered white in the dazzling sunlight. El Rojo took a step into the soft sand and quickly clutched at a low branch of the post oak beside him. He shuddered as he drew his foot out of the sucking mud—quicksand!

"Madre de Dios!" he said aloud. "But that was a close call." He broke off a rotted limb and tossed it into the sand, watching it slowly disappear from sight. Perspiration dripped from his chin and trickled down his back. He tried to swallow but his throat seemed coated with sand. The intense, sultry heat was like heavy chains on his limbs.

A few feet from where he stood a sibilant hissing sent a chill fear up his spine, and he quickly altered a decision to sit down and rest. He glimpsed a slithering rattlesnake preparing to strike. Backing away, a despair settled upon him. Where was the Llano Kid's camp?

In passing over the stony ridge he remembered seeing a range of gray cliffs in the distance. It was possible that some spring or stream fed these bogs and it would necessarily flow from the higher ground. Driven by a maddening thirst he pushed on in search of water.

The sun beat down in flaming fury. The muscles in his thin legs grew sluggish and rebelled at the command to keep

going. The blazing light bounced against his eye balls, leaving grotesque red shadows that distorted his vision. He stumbled along the gray, white-streaked cliffs, but found nothing except hot burning rocks.

The cool, bubbling spring at the mission ruins came to his mind, and he searched for the trail back through the chaparral. It all looked alike and yet, none of it was familiar. Pangs of hunger gnawed at his stomach and a lightness in his head made him dizzy. A darkness dimmed the darting red shadows before his eyes and he felt his legs buckle as the hot sand tilted and rushed at his face. Then everything went black.

WHEN he awoke the Llano Kid was bending over him dropping a trickle of water upon his swollen tongue. He grabbed for the canteen.

"Take it easy, Red," cautioned the Kid. "Just a little at a time."

El Rojo felt the precious liquid cool his scorched throat.

"I saw you climbing up on the cliffs," said the Texan. "What are you doing out here in the chaparral?"

"I—I got lost," answered the boy weakly, and reached for the canteen again.

With his thirst quenched, El Rojo recovered rapidly. He was stretched out in the shade of an ancient mesquite with a folded blanket under his head. He watched the sun drop toward the western horizon and it dawned upon him that he had promised to meet Juan Lopez at nightfall.

His eyes traveled over the camp. It lay under an over-hanging cliff and was sealed off by an impenetrable wall of chaparral. From a fissure in the cliff wall a spring gushed forth and trickled across the sand to be swallowed by the dense undergrowth.

A short distance away a girl was puttering over a fire and the pungent odor of cooking food drifted toward him—the rich aroma of boiling coffee, steaks broiling over a bed of hot coals. El Rojo sat up.

[Turn page]

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"Feel up to a little chow?" asked the Kid.

"Si, Senor. It smells very good."

The girl came toward him with a heaped plate. Hungry as he was he stared at the woman. She was the most beautiful lady he had ever beheld. A rosy flush colored her smooth olive cheeks and her large dark eyes spilled a shower of kindness upon him. He thought of the big portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe that hung in the village chapel.

"Sacred Mother!" muttered the boy. It was not right for this regal lady to bring him food. Better that he should wait upon her. "I—I am a mestizo," apologized the boy, confessing his unpardonable sin.

"You're hungry, aren't you?" she asked, and her voice was like rippling water.

"Si, Senorita," and El Rojo accepted the plate. Once in his possession he wolfed down the food as if he had to devour it quickly before anyone took it away from him.

"Good Heavens, you must have been starved," said the woman. "Would you like some more?"

El Rojo shook his head.

"We'd better get started," said the Kid. "so I can get back before dark." He squinted at the huge fiery ball perched on the distant horizon.

"Is it far to the village?" asked the boy timidly.

"Depends on how you go," replied the Texan, swinging into the saddle. "Here, hop up behind me."

THE Llano Kid rode into the dense thicket, following the game runs with seeming unconcern as to the direction they took. El Rojo did his best to memorize the route. Suddenly the Kid halted and motioned the boy to be silent. He disappeared into the brush. After a moment he returned and led El Rojo to the old mission ruins.

"Here we are," said the Llano Kid. "Reckon you can find your way from here."

"Si, Senor."

"One thing, Red," said the Kid, "don't say anything about the lady at my camp."

"My lips shall be locked, I swear by the Holy Mother."

"You can do me a favor," said the Kid, "ask the padre to meet me here early tomorrow morning. The senorita and I are getting married. But make sure only the padre hears your words."

"Si, I will tell him when it is dark."

"Why in the dark?"

"It is not good for me to be seen at the church."

"Reckon your thinking is a mite twisted, Red. A little church going would be good for you."

"But I am a mestizo," explained the boy.

"That's the second time you said you were a mestizo," remarked the Kid. "What's wrong about that? You ashamed of it?"

"But I am not Spanish—I am not Tejano. I am nothing. That is bad."

The Llano Kid lifted his blond head and laughed. "Most of the people in America are half of one thing and half another."

"Do they not hate them for it?"

"Certainly not. I'm Irish and German myself."

"But—"

"It doesn't make any difference what race you come from, just so you're a good lad—honest, truthful, and do the right thing. Now vou hike back to town before it gets dark."

El Rojo stared after the Llano Kid as he rode off into the gathering dusk. When the tall rider was swallowed by the chaparral he turned his steps toward the village.

In America there were many mestizos. No one laughed at you, or hated you because you were of two different bloods. Even the Llano Kid was a mestizo—Irish and German. Somehow that seemed to be a much better mixture than Mexican and Tejano. Yet it was comforting to know that there was a place where it was no disgrace to be a mestizo.

The night came quickly while the boy was still plodding toward the village. Lights winked at him in the darkness, and a cool breeze came up out of the east. He hastened his pace. Juan Lopez would be waiting in front of the cantina. He had to give the message to the padre. And he must remember to say nothing of the senorita.

Noiselessly he padded along the street and in the pale yellow patch of light that slanted out of the cantina window he could see Lopez talking to another man. El Rojo moved slowly in the shadows to pass the men. A shudder passed through him as the chill night wind stirred the thick dust in the street. It would be good when he could get the warm serape.

"How do you know the senorita is with the Llano Kid?" asked the dark-faced man with Lopez.

"I have a way to find out these things."

EL ROJO stopped suddenly. How did they know about the senorita? He had not breathed a word of her.

"But this Tejano, he is not one easy to dispose of."

"He cannot watch in two directions at once," said Juan. "That is why I have you come with me."

"You know for certain she is with him?"

"For certain, Miguel. I have talked with the senorita's maid."

"Many have talked with her," scoffed Miguel. "She knows nothing."

"Her lips were sealed by a solemn promise to heaven."

"Si."

"But I have the golden key which unlocks the lips," said Juan, a wicked smile stretching his loose mouth. He tossed a gold piece into the air.

El Rojo watched the reflected light flash from the golden coin. Soon he would own one of these. He edged closer to get a better look.

"I wish it were some other one besides the Llano Kid," said Miguel, shaking his

[*Turn page*]

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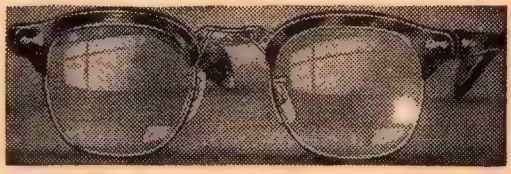

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head. "These Tejanos are hard to kill."

"Bah! He is flesh and blood like any other man," sneered Juan derisively. "A bullet in his heart and he is no more. Then we take the senorita to Don Luis and he pays us the reward."

"Sounds easy," commented Miguel. "All except killing the Tejano."

El Rojo had been concentrating on the gold coin Lopez was flipping into the air. Suddenly it dawned upon him that these men were planning to harm his friend. They were trying to prevent the Kid from marrying the beautiful senorita. A panic gripped him, choking the air in his lungs.

"Could not the maid of the senorita's tell you where they hide?" asked Miguel.

"She did, but she was wrong."

"So that is why you cut her throat?"

"No one makes a fool of Juan Lopez." There was a vindictive ring to his voice that cut sharply into the boy's mind. He cringed and scraped against the side of the cantina. Lopez whirled around with cat-like swiftness.

"So there you are, Rojo," said Juan, recognizing the boy. "We have been waiting for you."

"Him!" laughed Miguel. "You think the mestizo can take you to the Llano Kid?"

"The Tejano is his very good friend," replied Juan slyly. "Is that not so, Rojo?"

"Si, sir, Senor Juan." The frightened boy backed away as the two men converged upon him.

"And you will take us to him?"

"Si." The boy's teeth were chattering.

"Because if you do not, I will cut off your ears, like this." Juan drew his long, razor-sharp knife and made a gesture as if to sever his ears. El Rojo did not move. He was frozen stiff with fear.

"But if he takes us to the Llano Kid, I will give him this." Juan held the gold double eagle under the boy's nose.

El Rojo gazed hungrily at the coin, and in that moment he knew he no longer wanted it.

"Miguel, get the mule for El Rojo," ordered Lopez. "We must get started. It is best to surprise him in the first sleep for that is the soundest."

THE boy was hoisted to the back of a fleet, gray mule and the others mounted their mustangs. He led the way across the hard-packed desert along the trail to the old mission ruins. He had not given the message to the padre, but there was no chance to tell him now. The first shock of fear had left him and his mind was racing like the flying hoofs of his mount. He knew he had to do something to save his friend and the senorita.

If he betrayed any sign of deception he knew Lopez would not hesitate to mutilate him. Had he not slit the throat of the senorita's maid?

The words of the Llano Kid sped across his mind. It was not bad to be a mestizo. A shimmer of courage braced him. He must be honest, truthful and do the right thing.

El Rojo wished he could explain to the Kid how difficult that was to do at this moment. If he should be honest and truthful and lead Juan Lopez to the camp, it would not be the right thing to do. And yet each leap of the mule brought him closer to that destination.

A pale moon shone with a cold silver light. Now and then ragged, wind-blown clouds dimmed its brightness. Patches of mesquite and prickly pear cast weird shadows across their path. Suddenly they plunged into the deep gloom of the chaparral.

As the sweet fragrance of the huisache and quebradora hit his nostrils, El Rojo thought of the kind senorita. Again she reminded him of the Lady of Guadalupe. At that instant he knew what he would do.

He flattened himself close to the back of the fleet-footed mule to escape the sharp thorns and spines of the tangled brush. He guided his mount along the winding trail through the thicket, then shot across the rocky, barren ridge, and into the adjoining chaparral.

The dank, musty smell of rotting vegetation rose from the boggy floor of the

magote. Directly ahead the bright moonlight splashed upon the broad stretch of smooth sand. He must keep the pace rapid so neither of his companions would have time to think.

His body tensed as he spurred the mule to greater speed. Juan and Miguel were at his heels. Ahead of him loomed the black outline of the post oak and he veered the mule to that side of the trail. As he did, Juan's bronc shot into the lead, closely followed by Miguel's. El Rojo reached out and hooked an arm around the oak tearing himself from the animal's back.

Sharp spines and thorns ripped at his body but he ignored the pain. He watched Juan's mustang leap into the white sand, tumble head first, and thrash wildly in the treacherous muck. Miguel's horse and the mule piled on top of it.

For a moment the air was rent with the angry shouts and curses of the men, the squeals and violent kicking of the helplessly mired, frightened animals. It was a moment of horror-filled bedlam, then a strange, weird silence. The surface of the quick-sand was again calm, and unruffled, as if nothing had ever disturbed its peace.

El Rojo sighed and carefully extricated himself from the thorny branches. There was a momentary stab of sadness as he thought of the gold coins now buried with Juan Lopez. They could have brought him so many good things. He turned and followed the hoof-marked trail, dimly visible in the filtered moonlight, back to the village. He must hurry now for he had to deliver the message to the padre.

As he walked a new sense of pride lifted his head and swelled his chest. The Llano Kid did not think a mestizo was bad. El Rojo would always be honest and truthful, and perhaps some day he could tell the Kid how he had done the right thing.

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THE STAGE COACH

A Cargo of Range Facts and Oddities

JOE RANKIN, a Rawlings, Wyoming, pioneer, ran 160 miles in 28 hours from Mill Creek, Colorado, to Fort Steele, Wyoming. It doesn't say why Joe kicked up the dust at this rate, but we figure he either had Injuns on his heels or a wife with a temper who was a fair country runner herself.

* * * * *

And speaking of running, it's claimed the old-time Hopi Indians could outrun a deer and frequently did so to prove their prowess. We wonder if perchance the word deer is slightly misspelled here.

* * * * *

You might figure the mayor of Snowflake, Arizona, would have a name something like Jack Frost. And you would be entirely right!

* * * * *

For years it has been thought that many diseases, such as syphilis, were unknown to the American Indian before the coming of European explorers. According to Dr. Harold N. Cole of Cleveland, however, syphilis did exist in America before the arrival of Columbus and the white man. And he has 57 skeletons of pre-Columbian age which he says proves the disease was already here when the Europeans landed.

In Lakewood, New Mexico, there was once a saloon that boasted of a "door with easy hinges." The point of this, it seems, was to advertise the fact that the door could readily be removed to serve as a stretcher for customers who had been too slow on the draw. Or so the story goes.

* * * * *

The loco weeds of the Western plains are so called because they have a narcotic-like effect on the animals that eat them, chiefly horses, cattle and sheep. Makes 'em act silly. Hence the common use of the word loco for those who have flipped their wigs, slipped their hackamores, or whatever.

* * * * *

Pipe Spring National Monument in Arizona is named for a legendary feat of arms on the part of "Gunlock Bill" Hamblin, a crack rifle shot. While at the springs, which at the time had no name, Hamblin won a bet by shooting the bowl out of an ordinary smoking pipe without hitting the rim at a distance of 50 paces. Holey smoke!

* * * * *

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